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Dark Shades in the Unfortunate Comedy: Helena's Project in *All's Well That Ends Well*

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Abstract

The epithet "the unfortunate comedy," though first attached to *All's Well That Ends Well* through some superstitious associations, quite aptly sums up the worrying impressions of dissonances haunting the play's happy end. This paper proposes to examine the care that goes into Shakespeare's rendering of the dark shades and worrying impressions which give "the unfortunate comedy" its distinctive flavor. Attention will be given to at least three sorts of off-notes Shakespeare highlights in the play. Specifically, the paper will illustrate how Shakespeare brings about ambivalent feelings about Helena's final triumph by (1) enhancing the clashes between the play's "romantic patterns" and "anti-romantic preoccupations," (2) foregrounding the intractability of human wills and conflicting needs by the play's strikingly realistic characterization and, (3) through ironic syncopations of the main motif in the background, deepening the impression that "misjudgment and the misprizing of true values" are universal human flaws. For a play sometimes called "Shakespeare's most thorough experiment with comic form," the dark shades of strain should be deemed its definitive quality—and a fully intended effect.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Problem Plays, *All's Well That Ends Well*, Experiment with Comic Form

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Helena stands out as the number one achiever among all Shakespearean heroines. Her resolve to win seems uncanny in light of the staggering odds against her and the meager means available to her. She fights a solitary battle relying mostly on her own strength of character. Aside from the ideal passive virtues common for Shakespearean women such as chastity, long-suffering, patience and humility, Helena also raises quite a few brows by her exceptional verve in initiating action, gambling at high stakes, and pressing on indefatigably--ready to close the deal at any costs—all for the completion of her self-assigned "project."

Helena's "project," stated baldly, aims at her marrying a young aristocrat who slights her love because of her base origin. Perhaps due to her humble background, Helena never expects to get anything for free, constantly reminding herself of the prices of things and the payments she owes others. In keeping with her hard-headed work ethic, she seems to be deeply committed to her vow to "deserve" what she asks for. To start her Herculean project, she has no other capital except "virtue's steely bones in the cold wind," "the jewel of her chastity," and some moldy medical cures bequeathed by her late physician father. Her prospects in the market look dim indeed. Undaunted, Helena works tirelessly, first showing her "merit" by healing the King of a potentially mortal fistula, and then gaining rapid ascendancy by leveraging greater sources of power. Even though her bridegroom runs away right after their wedding, she bounces back and resumes her struggle for the second round. To pull through lean times, she exploits networking skills and circumvents hurdles with the help of secret allies. Thus, combining patient deployment with bold maneuvers, she manages to descend on her target at a strategic moment and accomplish her project with a flourish. Harold Bloom marvels at Helena's achievement in awe:

> Does anyone else in Shakespeare, woman or man, struggle so incessantly and at last so successfully to surmount every impediment to the fulfillment of an ambition? Only the hero-villains rival Helena—Richard III, Iago, Edmund, Macbeth—and they all at last are slain or undone.[1]

At first glance, Helena's enterprising spirit and positive attitude seem to qualify her for an inspiring role model at some Dale Carnegie assertiveness training course today. Yet, this image of an effective "woman of action" fits Helena only when one forms one's impression by the bare skeleton of the scenario, passing over many knotty patches in the composite mingle-mangle of the play's fabric. Looking beyond the skeleton scenario, one confronts a far more complex and elusive woman in

1 Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 355.

Shakespeare's portraiture of Helena.[2] This curious anomaly of a Shakespearean comic heroine has in fact long been a focus of polarized response in *All's Well*'s critical history. She has been criticized for being either too subservient or too aggressive, either too self-denying or too self-serving. The elevated high-moral tone of her language jars with the dubious bed-trick she plays in the dark. For some critics, she is "Shakespeare's loveliest character" and a saintly wife.[3] For others, "the hocus pocus about her priestess-like incantation and bogus miracle" is distasteful, even redolent of some "mountebank jargon."[4] Sheldon Zitner calls the diverse critical views of Helena "an anthology of thinking about the status of woman."[5] Indeed, in many ways, Shakespeare seems to have accommodated ambiguity into the play and invited controversy on purpose. Thus, Helena's project, like a Rorschach test, reveals our predispositions, not only in gender politics but also on life in general.

All's Well is believed to have based its plot on William Painter's English translation (1566, 1569, 1575) of a prose novella from Boccaccio's *Decameron*.[6] The Boccaccio story, told in a spirited, straightforward fashion, bears many common traits of folk tales in the oral tradition. A number of Helena's controversial qualities—such as audacious forwardness and scheming deception—are really derivatives from the source story. W. W. Lawrence offers the most influential defense for Helena by asserting her kinship with a folktale archetype and exempting her from ethical disputes. Citing a wealth of analogous folktale materials, Lawrence argues that Helena's characterization is modeled on the "Clever Wench" well known to a long-standing folktale tradition. Her "healing of the King," "fulfillment of impossible tasks," "recovery of a reprobate husband"—all popular folktale motifs—are clearly imbued with romance value and therefore meant by Shakespeare to be noble, heroic and fully justified.[7]

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2 As Josephine Waters Bennett puts it, Helena is "easily the most subtle and intricate portrait of a woman which Shakespeare has created." See Bennett's "New Techniques of Comedy in *All's Well That Ends Well*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 18 (1967), 345.

3 *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, Thomas M. Raysor, ed. (London: Dent, 1960), 113; G. Wilson Knight, *The Sovereign Flower* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 122.

4 Richard A. Levin, "*All's Well That Ends Well*, and 'All Seems Well'," *Shakespeare Studies* 13 (1980), 135.

5 Sheldon P. Zitner, *Twayne's New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare: All's Well That Ends Well* (Boston: Twayne Publishers 1989), 92.

6 Susan Snyder, "Introduction," *All's Well That Ends Well* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1.

7 W. W. Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (New York: Penguin Books, 1931,

Borrowing raw material from romance narratives, however, does not mean retaining intact the import of the source story. As it is noted by Jonathan Bate, "Shakespeare has a special capacity to absorb source materials while resisting single-mindedness in explanation, tone or judgment."[8] Honigman also identifies Shakespeare's tendency to multiply visions and mingle impressions as pointing to a core principle of his art.[9] The distinct "inclusive" and "ambiguous" effects *All's Well* creates seem to exemplify a bold exercise of this fundamental Shakespearean principle. The brisk little tale about a plucky, clever wench's husband hunting expedition is transmuted into the experience of a world of entirely different mood and coloration. Shakespeare has introduced into *All's Well* layers of tints and shades evocative of inexpressible longings and shadows impossible to dispel—quite unknown to the unreflective simple source story.

G. K. Hunter describes the play's definitive quality as a sense of "strain."[10] The peculiar tension, many critics agree, comes from the way in which *All's Well* seems to yoke together "realism" and "romance" and bring them into deliberate conflict.[11] While familiar storybook motifs give the overall configuration of the play a distinctly romantic shape, Shakespeare chooses to inject the characterization with such an overdose of psychological realism that the weight of honesty often seems too much for the romantic plot to carry. Three-dimensional characterization establishes the characters' rights to assert individual needs in keeping with their psychological integrity. The audience can understand their dilemma as "horribly real people caught in a fairy tale."[12] Nevertheless, alarm bells invariably sound whenever the principal characters' less than ideal behavior mocks the high-moral

1969), 48.

8 Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997), 326.

9 E. A. J. Honigmann, *Myriad-minded Shakespeare* (London: MacMillan, 1989), 147.

10 G. K. Hunter, "Introduction" to the Arden Edition of *All's Well That Ends Well* (London: Methuen & Co., 1959), xxix.

11 Alexander Leggatt, "*All's Well* and the Testing of Romance," *Modern Language Quarterly* XXXII (1971), 21-41. The term "romance" is used in its broadest sense, closer to the general idea of "storybook," and making no specific reference to Shakespeare's last plays. Following Joseph G. Price's definition, the term "romance" is understood as characterizing that literature which "inflates the human spirit," whereas the term "realism" implicitly assumes a "deflation of the human spirit." See Joseph G. Price, *The Unfortunate Comedy: A Study of All's Well That Ends Well and Its Critics* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1968), vii.

12 E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1950), 89 -143.

ideal implied by the genre, and day-light realities threaten to rattle the romantic frame. This is because, much more than a departure from actuality, a violation of its own conventions tends to cause a deep disturbing effect in a work of fiction.[13] Set in a never-never-land, the Clever Wench's forceful taming of a reluctant husband might make an amusing easy read. Yet, it is inevitable that Helena's "project" will elicit endless interrogations on ethical, social and psychological grounds, for its full-fledged characters and significance-filled atmosphere invite the reader to take the story seriously.

Thus, instilling serious ingredients into barefacedly improbable situations, Shakespeare seems to be teasing the audience's expectation and working toward a different sort of comedy in *All's Well*. In his chiaroscuro presentation of Helena's "project," while a mature, tolerant point of view to some extent checks the dark potential of the play, pointing to the silver linings of the dark clouds, the gleams of light by no means dispel the unmistakable somber shades of doubt that continue to hover over the resolution. The epithet "the unfortunate comedy," though first attached to *All's Well* through some superstitious associations,[14] quite aptly sums up the worrying impressions of dissonances haunting the play's happy ending. This paper proposes to examine the care that goes into Shakespeare's rendering of the dark shades and worrying impressions which give "the unfortunate comedy" its distinctive flavor. Attention will be given to at least three sorts of off-notes Shakespeare highlights in the play. Specifically, the paper will illustrate how Shakespeare brings about ambivalent feelings about Helena's final triumph by (1) enhancing the clashes between the play's "romantic patterns" and "anti-romantic preoccupations," (2) foregrounding the intractability of human wills and conflicting needs by the play's strikingly realistic characterization and, (3) through ironic syncopations of the main motif in the background, deepening the impression that "misjudgment and the misprizing of true values" are universal human flaws. A sense of foreboding rises and envelopes *All's Well*'s comic ending as the audience recognizes that a hard-won battle might bring no more than a hollow victory—if it's a wrong war to enter.

The first phase of Helena's "project" moves along a distinct "romance" trajectory. Helena, a base-born female "knight-errant" goes on a quest for treasure, which, in her case, happens to be "a bright particular star out of her sphere" named "Bertram." Her heart's desire is readily awarded to her when she passes the test of

13 Leah Scragg, *Shakespeare's Mouldy Tales* (London & New York: Longman, 1992), 104.

14 The epithet began to dog *All's Well* in the 18th century after disagreeable accidents took place again and again during the performance of the play. See Joseph G. Price, *The Unfortunate Comedy: A Study of All's Well That Ends Well and Its Critics*, 6.

Heaven, miraculously curing the King's fatal illness and symbolically regenerating the realm. Adding to his source, Shakespeare invents an elaborate public husband-choosing scene in the open court and brings into relief the bravura pattern which rightly accompanies the triumphant climax of a romance tale. While the chivalrous knight's worth is traditionally proven beyond doubt and the bliss of the awarded match taken for granted, in *All's Well*, much to the consternation of all, the young Count, upon finding himself the lucky chosen bridegroom, bristles aghast and rejects outright the role assigned him by the romantic plot.

King Why, then, young Bertram, take her. She's thy wife.
Bertram My wife, my liege! I shall beseech your highness
In such a business give me leave to use
The help of mine own eyes.
King Know'st thou not, Bertram
What she has done for me?
Bertram Yes, my good lord,
But never hope to know why I should marry her.
King Thou know'st she has raised me from my sickly bed.
Bertram But follows it, my lord, to bring me down
Must answer for your raising? I know her well.
She had her breeding at my father's charge.
A poor physician's daughter my wife! Disdain
Rather corrupt me for ever. (2.3, 106-116)

Vexed by the young man's snobbish contempt and insolent rebuff, the King launches into an unexpectedly broadminded lecture about the true meaning of honor and rank. Although he seems to have inverted the traditional comic pattern, passing over the role of a blocking parent, and eagerly playing the role of an apologist for love, the King's enlightened defense of young love against social considerations is apparently motivated by his need to rationalize this misalliance and his impatience to exercise royal power. While he calls into question the validity of rigid social distinctions, ironically, he is arguing with the authority from the peak of that social hierarchy, trying to justify his insistence on finding Helena a place in it.

Even after the King offers a fairy-tale solution by elevating Helena and making her an equal to Bertram in rank and in wealth, the young Count petulantly refuses to comply: "I cannot love her, nor will strive to do't." This abrupt answer, in its sullen

bluntness, vividly captures the young man's callow recalcitrance, and, with an almost Pirandellian subversive humor, announces the hero's blatant refusal to take his place and blend into the traditional romance pattern. Bertram's outburst, as critics have noted, though unchivalrous in spirit, is quite justified on realistic terms.[15] The young Count rebels against his fate to be auctioned off as the husband of the healer of the King; his behavior has been harshly described as "mad in folly," unpardonable for its blindness to Helena's true worth. Yet, by the standard of Elizabethan practice, an arbitrarily arranged match like this one could well be considered an abuse of wardship, and a ward actually had legal rights to appeal in court for such a "disparaging marriage." Besides the dispute about disparity in birth, the lack of "free consent" from both parties would be enough to annul the marriage contract.[16] Bertram's protest, nonetheless, sends the King into a fury and, with thundering threats he simply browbeats his young ward into submission. Donning the face of a tyrannical patriarch, the King warns against the advance of a storm when he declares, "my honor is at stake." As he fends for his dignity as much as for the spurned bride, the King's explosion is well motivated and portrayed with psychological realism.

For sheer theatrical effectiveness, this scene may be deemed as one of the most brilliant among Shakespeare's confrontation scenes. While the hero's youthful impetuosity and bad grace make his open defiance psychologically plausible, the King's hurt ego piques the clashes of will. Of course, the young Count is no match for a king in wrath and he has no choice but to yield to the powerful pressure of the romantic plot for the moment. Yet, at the same time, through the audience's keen

15 During the first decade of the 17th century in England, intermarriages between landed gentry and professional families were hardly common; less than 8% of aristocrats married wives out of the peerage class. See Lawrence Stone's *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 286.

16 Margaret Loftus Ranald, "The Rights of Matrimony," *Shakespeare and His Social Context: Essays in Osmotic Knowledge and Literary Interpretation* (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 38, 43. Protestant moral theology, with its stress on "holy matrimony", promoted the right of "veto" for children to reject spouse candidates chosen by their parents "on the grounds that the antipathy aroused by a single interview was too great to permit the possibility of the future development of affection." See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*: *In England 1500-1800* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 134. Evidence shows that quite a few English aristocratic parents/guardians in the 16th century already based their marriage arrangements for their children/wards on the young people's "preferences". See Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1450-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55. This trend was steadily gaining grounds in the 17th century.

awareness of the coercive nature of the match, and through the psychological realism that has already established the characters as flesh-and-blood human beings, a throbbing sense of conflicting psychological needs weaves pain into the romantic pattern and lowers dark clouds over the mirthless new couple. Aside from the weight of psychological realities, the pressure of social realities is also unmistakably felt in the overburdened romantic fabric here. Shakespeare has widened the social gulf between Helena and Bertram in his alteration of the source and, quite emphatically, brought to the fore the mixed feelings surrounding a striking case of cross-class enforced marriage.[17]

Right after the marriage ceremony is completed, Bertram vents his agony to his companion Paroles, "Undone, and forfeited to cares ever!" In his cry, "O, my Paroles, they have married me!" the traumatized rage of a victim is palpable. Right away, the young man resolves to steal away from the French court and plunge himself into the battlefield in Italy. His flight from the nuptial bed will also grant him a long-coveted opportunity to prove his manhood away from the effeminate court. Earlier the young Count already expressed his dismay when his royal guardian stopped him from joining this war on account of his unripe age. The painful farewell he bid the courtiers who were leaving for war, in a startling imagery, graphically expressed young Bertram's aching need for a masculine identification:

I grow to you, and our parting is a tortured body (2.1, 36).

In light of such an intense longing for manly autonomy, his revolt from this unexpected match becomes more understandable. A life of domestication and female domination is clearly the last thing he wants before he has even stepped into the expansive world of adult manhood. While Shakespeare has provided enough background to extenuate Bertram's despair about the wretched lot with his "dark house and detested wife" (2.3, 293), care is also taken to bring into relief his immaturity in dealing with his predicament. Having neither the decency nor the ability to talk candidly to his new wife about his intention to go to the war, he sends her a message through Paroles, explaining his sudden departure with the unlikely excuse about some business calling elsewhere. In order to distance her from the court, he sends her packing to home straight away, feeding her with false hope for his homecoming before long. The deferral of the nuptial night must be a blow to

17 In Boccaccio's novella, Gilette—Helena's parallel in the source story—is rich and well connected. As John D. Cox indicates, Shakespeare is "defying received social opinion more clearly in *All's Well* than he does in any other marital relationship he dramatizes," *Shakespeare and the Dramaturgy of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 128.

Helena, but she receives the bad news with the patience of a paragon wife. Just when the newlyweds are about to part without saying good-bye, Shakespeare inserts a little gem of a scene, allowing the couple to cross paths unexpectedly and giving the audience a chance—the only chance in the play—to see them sharing a private moment on their own. Seizing this opportunity, Helena tries to humor her new husband by pledging her obedience like a conventional meek wife. Before she finishes, Bertram cuts her short with a cold brashness.

Bertram Let that go.
My haste is very great. Farewell. Hie home.
Helen Pray, sir, your pardon.
Bertram Well, what would you say?
Helen I am not worthy of the wealth I owe,
Nor dare I say 'tis mine, and yet it is;
But, like a timorous thief, most fain would steal
What law does vouch mine own.
Bertram What would you have?
Helen Something, and scarce so much. Nothing, indeed.
I would not tell you what I would, my lord.
Faith, yes:
Strangers and foes do sunder and not kiss.
Bertram I pray you stay not, but in haste to horse.
Helen I shall not break your bidding, good my lord. (2.5, 78-89)

This brief exchange illustrates Shakespeare's virtuosic skill of communicating life's disagreeable realities in no more than a few jarring notes. While the episode plays no expository function for the plot development, it is infinitely significant by offering a probing look into the drab psychological realities in this enforced marriage. Seeing that her bridegroom is leaving in a rush before consummating their marriage, Helena gathers enough courage and, in a strained language that covers nervous palpitations with timorous circuity, begs for the nuptial kiss she is now entitled to "by law." Unable to bring herself to name what she wants, she refers to the kiss she longs for by an equivocating riddle: Only strangers and enemies would bid farewell without a kiss… Bertram's flinty, terse answer says nothing about her request, but the stonewalling barely masks his disgust. So, with just a few understated strokes, Shakespeare sketches the harrowing lesson Helena has learned in this unbearable

moment of rejection. Indeed, for Bertram, Helena is no better than a stranger or an enemy; aside from a contractual bond hastily sealed, there is no connection between the two. The admixture of muted disenchantment and nearly comical awkwardness here, in a way, reminds us of the classic anticlimactic scene between Varya and Lopakhin in the last act of *Cherry Orchard*. Similarly, what gets to happen on stage only makes the audience more acutely aware of what has failed to happen. As psychological authenticity breaks in on the romantic pattern, the hero runs away, and the heroine's dream quietly turns to ashes in non-communication.

After Helena goes home, two letters from Bertram subsequently arrive at Rossillion. In the one addressed to his mother, Bertram declares that he has "wedded" but "not bedded" this unwanted bride, and "sworn to make the 'not' eternal." Teeth gritted, he vows, "If there be breadth enough in the world, I will hold a long distance." In the letter to Helena, Bertram announces his fixed intention to untie the knot by setting forth two "impossible tasks" for Helena.

> When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband. But in such a "then," I write a "never." (3.2, 57-61)

The last sentence attached is so full of childish malice that, evidently, instead of stipulating serious assignments, Bertram is writing large an adamant "No" to Helena through this cruel jest of a letter. Not missing the point, Helena wails ruefully, "This is a dreadful sentence."

In the shock upon hearing that her "ambitious love" might have exposed Bertram to the horrors of "none-sparing war," Helena heaps abuse on herself in a self-recriminating tone, and vows that, to save him from death, she will exile herself and go on a barefooted penitent pilgrimage afar. At her lowest point of abjection, Helena speaks of her decision to renounce all her claims on Bertram. Whether she was ever very serious about self-sacrifice and ready to let go, however, remains a moot point. Altering his source, Shakespeare has deliberately kept this ambiguous. Is it by design or by chance and Providence that her journey brings her to Florence, where she comes across Bertram and gets a second chance to ensnare him? Is the coincidence a sign of Providential help or the result of a carefully hatched plan? The play's vagueness about this robs us of a crucial piece in the puzzle of Helena's moral character; meanwhile, it enables Helena to maintain her commendable image as a devout pilgrim, free from all suspicions of aggressive man hunting.

Oblivious to all this, the young Count is enjoying Florence as a celebrated war hero. Eager to test his manly prowess in another field, he is also actively courting Diana, the daughter of a virtuous widow. As it happens, Helena becomes a lodger at the widow's and wins the trust of the mother and daughter. Upon learning that

Bertram has been importuning Diana for a nocturnal meeting, Helena instantly abandons her self-abnegating passive stance, begins a whirlwind of activities, and bends her mind towards reactivating her aborted "project." This is the opportunity for her to launch a surprise flanking attack on Bertram and remove the barricades he laid down for their marriage—and she does not hesitate to "take the instant by the forward top"(5.3, 39). To secure the help of Diana as her key ally, Helena bribes her generously, and promises to "over pay and pay again" for her further recompense. In a striking pragmatic, businesslike manner, Helena gives instructions as to how Diana should go about extracting Bertram's ancestral ring from him and how a midnight rendezvous between them could develop into a "bed-trick" which, if God wills, would allow Helena to conceive Bertram's child when she silently steps in as a substitute bedmate, disguised by the pitchy night.

Although much of Helena's audacity and cunning in engineering the bed-trick comes from *All's Well*'s source story, Shakespeare has chosen to insert into the storybook romance situation not only discussions about nitty-gritty practicalities and terms of exchange, but most disconcertingly, he also introduces an anti-romantic, analytical reflexivity in Helena's dispassionate contemplation on the nature of erotic desire after the bed-trick has finally fulfilled her wish to "lose her virginity to her liking"(1.1, 152).

> But O, strange men,
> That can such sweet use make of what they hate
> When saucy trusting of the cozened thoughts
> Defiles the pitchy night! So lust doth play
> With what it loathes for that which is away.
> But more of this hereafter. (4.4, 20-27)

Taking a clear-eyed look at male lust, Helena reflects on how lust can be an effect of the illusions of one's own mind. As long as one surrenders readily and clings to one's lascivious beliefs in the head, one can embrace all the sweetness of sex in the dark, even when the sex partner is someone loathsome in the daylight. Probing into the makeup of sexual appetite, Helena seems to be a bit bewildered to find it no more than an illusion of the mind and the senses. In Janet Adelman's words, the bed-trick epitomizes "not only the dark waywardness of desire but also the depersonalization and interchangeability of the bodies with which lust plays."[18] The erotic side of love seems to have remained a preoccupation in Helena's infatuation

18 Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 78.

with Bertram. (This is a young woman who daydreams with fascination about a hind's violent mating with a lion in her first soliloquy in the play.) As she muses over the complicated experience of the bed-trick—though she checks herself quickly and keeps much unsaid—Helena has evidently looked unflinchingly at the paradoxical nature of sex and is fighting a surge of mixed feelings. The audience's mixed feelings arise, too. For, now that Helena has come across as a woman who has enough sensitivity to recognize ironies, reflect philosophically, and feel pain, the "bed-trick" can no longer be facilely dismissed as a conventional romance device.

Some critics have justified the dubious means of the bed-trick by its end.[19] The psychoanalytic view sees the bed-trick as a sort of homeopathic cure, which promises to regulate unruly male desire, relocating it in the socially sanctioned bond of marriage. The religious view sees it as a saintly wife's redeeming act, which turns lechery into the service of married chastity and brings a prodigal back to the path of Christian virtue.[20] By the rules of the romance world, the bed-trick undoubtedly works to set a wrong right. But, evaluating the unscrupulous trick with a realistic eye, one has to agree with Harold Bloom that there is something rancid in the deception, which could never suit a wholly admirable character.[21] Even when moral judgment is suspended, the bed-trick strikes one simply as an intolerable emotional situation—once we picture Helena as a flesh-and-blood woman in it. What it involves requires Helena to simultaneously prostitute herself and her husband: during her treacherous ambush of Bertram, she is forced to confront nakedly his betrayal moment by moment. What sort of a woman would submit herself to such a cruel, twisted experience? Clifford Leech sees Helena's recklessness as a symptom of the fact that she is "going through a time of sickness."[22] Russell Frazer also calls

19 Eileen Z. Cohen, "'Virtue is Bold': The Bed-Trick and Characterization in *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*." *Philological Quarterly*, 65 (1986), 171-185. Ruth Nevo also sees the bed-trick as an "enabling fantasy" that promises enough anonymity for the partners to transcend the inhibitions of a threatening sexuality. See Ruth Nevo, "Motive and Meaning in *All's Well That Ends Well*," in *Fanned and Winnowed Opinions: Shakespearean Essays Presented to Harold Jenkins*, ed. John W. Mahon and Thomas A. Pendleton (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 46.

20 See Robert G. Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 113-31; Frances Pearce, "In Quest of Unity," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 25 (1974), 84-87; Roy Battenhouse, *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 145-162.

21 Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 354.

22 Clifford Leech, "The Theme of Ambition in *All's Well That Ends Well*," *ELH*, *A Journal*

her a heroine "benighted," "entoiled" and "ensnared" in her love.[23] For Robert Ornstein, Helena must have truly believed Bertram to be someone higher and far worthier than herself; only a heartfelt sense of inferiority could have made her accept his contemptuous conditions and bow to the humiliating experience of the bed-trick.[24] So, Shakespeare has created a conundrum of a heroine, apparently by endowing her with too rich a panoply of sense and sensibility, quite beyond the capacity of the unreflective romance plot.

Since the language of *All's Well* is redolent with serious implications and the psychological authenticity of the characters is often striking, psychoanalytic interpretations are particularly persuasive for this play. Both Helena's fixation with Bertram and Bertram's equally intense repulsion of her have been read as compulsive behavior driven by deeper psychological complexes. Harold Bloom sees a narcissistic element in Helena's monomaniac love for Bertram. In view of the fact that Helena grew up as the foster daughter of Countess Rossillion, Bloom speculates, she could have a subconscious longing to step into Bertram's shoes and to have Countess Rossillion as her authentic mother.[25] Following this hypothesis, it becomes less surprising to find that, as Helena reappears in the denouement as someone resurrected from death, she shows little signs of agitation until, at last, she turns to the Countess—with whom she seems to feel more rapport than anyone else. Her greeting to the Countess—"O my dear mother, do I see you living?"(5.3.319)—is so fraught with complicated emotions that it brings her to the verge of tears. As the denouement focuses on the unraveling of a clever intrigue and generally holds back effusive sentiments,[26] this moment of deep feelings gives an inkling of an uncommon bond between the two women.[27]

The mother's figure looms large on Bertram's desperate flight from this dreaded match, too. Although Bertram himself defends his abhorrence of Helena in social terms, as Richard Wheeler points out, behind his snobbish repugnance against

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of English Literary History 21.1 (1954), 17-29.

23 Russel Frazer, "Introduction" to *The New Cambridge Edition of All's Well That Ends Well* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 24.

24 Robert Ornstein, *Shakespeare's Comedies: From Roman Farce to Romantic Mystery* (New Ark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1986), 182.

25 Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 348-349.

26 Jean-Pierre Marquerlot, *Shakespeare and the Mannerist Tradition: A Reading of Five Problem Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), 169.

27 Ralph A. Houlbrooke identifies the mother/daughter bonds as the "strongest forged" in his study of the Early Modern English family ties. See Ralph A. Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450-1700* (London and New York: Longman, 1984), 187-188.

this misalliance, the Incest Taboo is really what the red lights are blinking about.[28] The fact that Helena grew up in the same household like a base-born foster sister to Bertram, and that, due to her closeness to the Countess, she has always been closely associated with his mother, constitute what seems to be the most intractable barrier against the two of them achieving an unclouded marriage. This hypothesis makes sense particularly when we notice that the King's promise to grant Helena high rank and fantastic wealth does nothing to soften Bertram's resistance. Thus, on the one hand, the hero flies desperately from his unspeakable, repressed incestuous impulses; on the other hand, the heroine embarks on a full-tilt chase, ready to win him at any cost— not so much for his intrinsic value, but propelled by a deep-seated childhood wish to prove her own worth. As Shakespeare has written in a way that encourages one to delve deep into the characters' motives—even reaching beyond their own consciousness—one is tempted to read interstitially and find intimations of deeper and darker problems lurking beneath Helena and Bertram's contrary wishes and conflicting needs.

While considerations of deep psychological hang-ups could partially extenuate Bertram's mean behavior toward Helena, he remains the most unsparingly presented and least popular Shakespearean comic hero. There seems to be an emphatic blackening of his character in Shakespeare's alteration of the source story.[29] A beautiful but shallow and aloof young aristocrat, Bertram seems to walk out of the same mold as the "Cruel Fair" in the Sonnets. Some critics have detected an element of personal hurt and animosity behind the merciless realism Shakespeare applies to this unworthy young man.[30] Since 1950, theories have been ventured as to how *All's Well* and the Sonnets, through different forms, actually arise from the same set of preoccupations, both bearing Shakespeare's special personal interest.[31] Even

28 Richard P. Wheeler "Imperial Love and the Dark House," *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies: Turn and Counter-Turn* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1981), 53.

29 A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare* (London & New York: Longman, 1989), 91.

30 Roger Warren, "Why Does It End Well? Helena, Bertram, and the Sonnets," *Shakespeare Survey* 22 (1969), 79-92.

31 M. C. Bradbrook, "Virtue Is the True Nobility: A Study of the Structure of *All's Well*," *Review of English Studies* 1, 4 (October 1950), 289-301; G. W. Knight, *The Sovereign Flower*, 95; Roger Warren, "Why Does It End Well? Helena, Bertram, and the Sonnets"; Rchard P. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies*, 57-75; David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 198-237.

when we put aside conjectures about biographical significance, Bertram may be deemed Shakespeare's bold essay for an anomalous comic hero. As a realistic character, he is a brilliant success, consistent with all his faults, and distinct with all the fully intended troubling effects. But his unyielding recalcitrance is often too much to fit into the romance pattern, imperiling not only Helena's "project," but the audience's endorsement for the comic ending. His snobbish airs, repeated lying, and crass chauvinistic treatment of women deepen the impression that he is "a bad scion of a good stock." Among his unlovely qualities, the trait that most darkens his promise as a marriage partner, however, has to be his want of feelings. His unruffled self- absorption in the face of a best pal's social downfall exposes the shallowness of his friendship for Paroles. His protestations of self-reproach and remorse about Helena's death can never sound convincing after he is heard, in a lighthearted tone, counting the sixteen businesses he had to hastily dispatch for the hectic night, naming in the same breath "burying a wife," "mourning for her" and a sexual assignation he is rubbing his hands for (4.3, 85-92).

Helena's calculating manipulativeness has been a focus of attack for her castigators. But, in order to win, she really has no alternative. Bertram's complete want of feelings for her pushes her to drastic means. Evidently, she has never had any success with Bertram in private. The lesson hit home when she begged him for no more than a kiss before he left right after their wedding. Seeing that only "by indirection" can she "find direction out," Helena resorts to devious scheming in spite of her frequent self-questioning and "self-dramatizing guilt."[32] When the occasion arises, she senses that the bed-trick will grant her a chance to "gain performance on her perfectly legal bond,"[33] she plunges into action right away. Subjecting Bertram's letter to what business managers today would call "positive framing,"[34] she deliberately ignores the true import of Bertram's cruel words (which she knows to be a "dreadful sentence" that banishes her), and interprets the impossible tasks as specific assignments she is expected to complete. The sleight-of-hand she plays with legalistic reading, in a way, reminds one of Portia's outwitting Shylock by a cunning re-interpretation of his bond. Although, technically, the bed-trick has fulfilled the impossible tasks to the letter, Helena's success here seems even more dubious than Portia's. The heart of the trouble is: while Portia is contesting with an enemy, Helena is trying to win love from a husband. Will her husband be offended once he

32 Sheldon P. Zitner, *Twayne's New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare: All's Well That Ends Well*, 92.

33 M. L. Ranald, "All's Well, The Rights of Matrimony," 37.

34 *The Results-Driven Manager: Winning Negotiations That Preserve Relationships*, Harvard Business School Press (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), 82.

finds out how he was "crushed by a plot"? It is true that, in folk-tales, the husbands of the Clever Wenches are invariably pleased with the devotion and artfulness of their wives after the unraveling of bed-tricks.[35] Yet, as it is well established, Bertram is made of far more intractable stuff. The bed-trick might fulfill the contractual terms, but it has not resolved the problems on the psychological level.

Helena seems to know the limitation of her success well enough. Unlike Gilette, Helena's parallel in the source story, who goes directly to her husband, lays before him proofs of her fulfillment of the conditions he set, and readily receives his kiss of approval, Helena recognizes that the completion of the impossible tasks in itself will not suffice to make Bertram honor their bond. Seeing that she has no chance of changing Bertram's heart on her own, she sets to work and stage-manages a spectacular public taming of her unruly husband. Since she herself has little power over him, Helena needs to find a way to leverage greater sources of power. The ring the King gives her, a token of thanks for her miraculous cure, is a signet carrying the power of royal sanction. Through this potent talisman, Helena sends out a summons for help and has the King's protection at her command. The other ring she acquires through the help of Diana—Bertram's ancestral ring, a Rossillion heirloom—also signals her access to the Countess's support. The child she conceived through the bed-trick grants her the warrant to cut into the legitimate lineage of Rossillions. Thus, empowered by such weighty proofs of her dues, Helena reappears and demands an open ratification of her marriage contract.

She enters at a strategic moment when Bertram finds himself in deep straits. Besieged by Diana's maddening accusations, Bertram sinks deeper and deeper into a morass of ignoble lying and maligning. He founders when fighting to extricate himself from suspicions about Helena's mysterious death. The King becomes "wrapped in dismal thoughts" (5.3, 128) and nearly ready to put him to death for the murder of Helena. Helena's unexpected entrance at this juncture dumbfounds all, for her death has been mourned and accepted as a fact. To Bertram especially, Helena's return must feel like a miracle. Just when he is helpless like a cornered animal, at a hair's breadth from dire death, Helena appears and offers him a route of escape. Responding to the King's wonder-struck marveling, Helena identifies herself as an unwanted wife: failing to gain the husband's free consent, she is drifting in a liminal void—like a ghost roaming in limbo.

> 'Tis but the shadow of a wife you see,
>
> The name and not the thing. (5. 3, 306-307)

The sadness in her plight presses Bertram for an answer. At this point, Bertram is

35 W. W. Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*, 57.

brought so low and so shaken by the bad scare—not unlike Paroles in his naked exposure—that he has no choice but to say anything that will get him out of the fix. In confusion, the flustered young man manages to utter no more than four wooden words, feebly retracting his rejection in a plea for mercy.

Both, both. O pardon!

Perhaps this long-awaited apology, for a second, touches a chord in Helena. She suddenly points to Diana and reminds Bertram the experience they shared in the "bed-trick."

O my good lord, when I was like this maid,

I found you wondrous kind. (5. 3, 309-310)

The subject is so intimate and indecorous for a public occasion like this that Harold Bloom finds this particular remark "the most outrageous" among all Helena's audacities.[36] Although Helena has not opened up more about what goes on in her inner thought at this moment, what matters here is that this brief remark has divulged that this is a woman who chooses to keep to herself complex feelings about love's ironies.[37] But it is just a fleeting moment that Helena loses herself to sentiments and touches on the emotional dimension of her quandary. She quickly circumvents the knotty spots of human psychology and gets back to business like a true romance heroine, determined to bring her "project" to its fixed destination. One by one Helena produces tokens for her completed tasks, and, in a tone that reminds one of a business woman checking items in an invoice, claims her debt.

There is your ring,

And look you, here's your letter. This it says:

"When from my finger you can get this ring

And are by me with child, etc." This is done.

Will you be mine, now you are doubly won? (5. 3, 310-314)

Once again, necessity compels Bertram to give in. Yet, in spite of the relief he should feel at having saved his skin, his acceptance of Helena sounds awkward and strained, not only because it is expressed in conventional platitudes, but also because

36 Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 356.

37 The import of this riddling remark could be speculated along multiple lines. Is she musing fondly over Bertram's potential to be a loving husband? Is she mocking his crude lust, which does not distinguish one body from another? Or, rather, she is acknowledging her lack of Bertram's favor, her envy for those who enjoy his approval, and registering a keenly felt need for his acceptance?

it is stated in a conditional sentence, diffusing tentative, non-committal overtones.

If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly,

I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly. (5.3, 315-316)

The fact that Bertram should profess his love for his wife to the King says much about the power mechanism involved here. Helena makes no emotional appeals to Bertram clearly because she cannot expect to move him that way. No matter how much she has labored to strengthen her case and accumulate proofs of her desert, ultimately, it depends on the King's arbitration—his coercion—to bring Bertram to heel. This reconciliation scene, indeed, sees little direct exchange of words and virtually no physical contact between the couple on stage. And, as if to deepen the impression of the fragility of resolution, Shakespeare has Bertram promise his repentance pending on a clear explanation of what actually happened. Just as Bertram's track record gives rise to a cloud of uneasy questions,[38] the King's conclusive words are not reassuring. Although he is evidently making an effort to patch things up into a good-enough ending, strangely, echoing Bertram's conditional repentance, he also slips into the conditional, giving a hollow ring to his auspicious prognostication for the future.

All yet seems well, and if it end so meet,

The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet.(5.3, 332)

The litany of conditionals in the end, in the midst of a welter of muted emotions, leaves the audience with the impression that happiness has not been achieved with any surety in the play, and that it is merely the wish for it that gets asserted here.[39]

Shakespeare has refused to obliterate all the unlovely qualities of Bertram and change the frog into the prince in a fairytale ending. But why on earth should the heroine remain attracted to a frog to the very end? Here lies a knotty question for the play. Many critics share the complaint that "Bertram comes at too high a price for Helena" and that the brittle reconciliation at the end is "hardly commensurate with Helena's extravagant effort."[40] E. K. Chambers calls Bertram "a poor prize for

38 Wouldn't Bertram go back on his words as soon as he finds how much guile and tactics have gone into Helena's effort to get him? Wouldn't he resent the fact that she has gone to such great lengths to shame him and made him degrade himself in public? Wouldn't he find it intolerable to live with someone so unresponsive to his confirmed hate?

39 Susan Snyder, "'The King's not here': Displacement and Deferral in *All's Well That Ends ell*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 43, (Spring 1992), 29.

40 Sheldon P. Zitner, *Twayne's New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare: All's Well That Ends Well*, 128, 150.

which she has trailed her honor in the dust."[41] Indeed, Helena seems to have created Bertram out of her wish. For her, Bertram's superior worth is a given, beyond normal evaluation, and obviously untarnished by his shabby conduct. Clifford Leech accounts for Helena's arduous chase of Bertram by the irrationality of love.[42] Although she is often blamed for being too pushy and calculating in her fierce pursuit of Bertram, for all her Machiavellian maneuvering, there is actually a strain of self-destructive recklessness in her locking herself into this unpropitious deal. Begging for the Countess' sympathy, she describes her abject love in such words.

O then give pity
To her whose state is such that cannot choose
But lend and give where she is sure to lose… (1.3, 213-215)

Comparing her love to an ever-giving "leaking sieve," Helena seems to have never placed any hope on Bertram's return of affection from the start. There was a time when she just wanted to worship him like a sun, contented with the comfort of his radiance from above. But, Bertram's departure for the court leaves her "undone," and she recognizes that "there is no living" away from him (1.1, 86). Her fervent love emboldens her and piques her into action for a more ambitious "project" of striving to marry him. Evidently, viewed in the whole picture, Helena cannot be the triumphant brilliant schemer of "inf'nite cunning" (5.3, 215) Richard Levin makes her out to be.[43] With a "monstrous desperation" (2.1, 180), she is ready to pay any price to close the deal, "cutting corners to win" if necessary, "demeaning herself and abandoning her dignity" without protest. But, when there is no room to weigh costs and benefits, and when walking away is not a choice at all, all the tactics and bustles in the world are not enough to earn Helena the title of a smart bargainer.

Helena's image as a contriving schemer has caused enough apprehension for some critics to call her either "a knave" or "a fool."[44] But, *All's Well*'s alterations of the source story reveal that Shakespeare has taken great care to preserve Helena from blame in the eyes of other characters in the play. In the world of the play she is praised universally by all except Bertram; the sagacious elderly especially think highly of her. It has been argued that Helena's daring initiative and decisive control

41 E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey* (London: Sigwick and Jackson, 1925), 207.

42 Clifford Leech, "The Theme of ambition in *All's Well That Ends Well,*" 23.

43 Richard Levin, "*All's Well That Ends Well* and 'All Seems Well,'" 114-37.

44 Arthur Kirch, *Shakespeare and the Experience of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 110.

make her a threatening female figure.[45] Her achievements have even been read as a threefold wish fulfillment of subversive fantasies regarding female agency, female desire and class-crossing.[46] Perhaps it is to mitigate her disquieting aggressiveness that Shakespeare makes a point of emphasizing her conformity to conventional female manners. The plot of the play also suggests Helena's dependence on Providence, insinuating a congruence between Helena's pursuit and the will of some shadowy transcendental order. Susan Snyder identifies religious coloration as a necessary mystification and justification for Helena's unconventional behavior. Her pious stance, like her meekness, self-denial and self-doubt, indicates Shakespeare's attempt to camouflage the subversive elements in her violation of traditional patriarchal rules.[47] Although Helena manages to pursue passion and social advancement in double harness, her image as a high-minded maiden favored by Heaven relieves much of the suspicion about opportunist self-promotion. Bearing the insignia of a beneficent Providence, Helena modestly gives all the credit to Heaven and softens much of the threat of female power. Given that neither the supernatural nor the wise elderly play a part in *All's Well*'s source story, Shakespeare makes these additions apparently for the purpose of lending Helena some much-needed endorsement from higher authorities.[48] By granting Helena an

45 Alexander Welsh, "The Loss of Men and Getting of Children: *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*," *Modern Language Review* 73 (1978): 17-28; Lisa Jardine, "Culture Confusion and Shakespeare's Learned Heroines: 'These are Old Paradoxes,'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38, 1 (1987), 7-23; Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 71. About the prevalent fear of female domination in the Early Modern English culture, see Phyllis Rackin, "Misogyny is Everywhere," Dympna Callaghan, Ed., *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher Ltd., 2000), 42-56.

46 17th century popular culture conceives the female body as essentially passive and makes women's sexual agency a metaphor for political chaos. For a discussion on the contemporary culture's anxieties about women's transgressions, see Laura Gowing: *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 85-90. Also see Peter Erickson, "The Political Effects of Gender and Class in *All's Well That Ends Well*," Simon Barker, ed., *New Casebooks: Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 54-73.

47 Susan Snyder, "'The King's not here': Displacement and Deferral in *All's Well That Ends Well*," 26; See also David McCandless, *Gender and Performance in Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1997).

48 Joseph G. Price: *The Unfortunate Comedy: A Study of All's Well That Ends Well and Its Critics*, 154.

aura of Providential sanction, unreserved approval from the mature point of view, and a meticulously submissive facade, Shakespeare seems to be taking precautions to fend off reproach and establish her as a basically virtuous character.

Although Helena is consistently commended for her virtue in the world of the play, Shakespeare has weighted the dice expertly against those who want her to be a paragon heroine. In more unobtrusive ways, he makes Helena come across as an erring human being. Striving to achieve success for her project, she is shown to have succeeded only at her own expense. *All's Well*'s comic ending takes on an unfortunate shade because there are major unresolved problems lying under the painfully wrested success. Considering the match on the level of psychological realism, the audience cannot wholeheartedly endorse the comic end for the couple's incompatibility has been so manifestly exhibited. The want of feelings in Bertram's grain is chilling, but Helena' unresponsiveness to Bertram's wishes is also alarming.[49] On a deeper level, a strain tautens in the comic end because something is threatening to break the seams in the interface of romance and realism of the play. Helena has not only chosen a wrong target for her pursuit, she has also mistakenly applied the logic of romance to her pursuit of a distinctly realistic relationship. As a romance heroine, Helena can expect to win a man she loves by passing the test of healing the King or fulfilling other impossible tasks. As a three-dimensional realistic character, however, she should know well that such achievements are not relevant to questions of psychological conditions. After all, credit earned in the romance world is not valid currency for "deserving" a realistic character for a marriage partner. The ring-test, the bed-trick, and even the intrigue-filled spectacular denouement are all plainly romance devices. For Helena to gain the day, much hinges on the fact that she has deliberately followed the letter, rather than the spirit, of Bertram's impossible terms and slyly turns them around to work toward a checkmate to her advantage. Whereas her legalistic misreading of the letter might be a cunning sleight of hand for a game, there is no logical ground to expect the tricky move to iron things out in a drama full of headstrong psychological conflicts. Thus, as Helena produces her check drawn on romantic terms and insists on cashing it in the realistic world, a shadow of uneasiness steals in.

The shadow of uneasiness spreads and deepens as it becomes evident that human problems are too intractable for a neat comic ending to contain them. In a self-motivating soliloquy at the outset of her quest, Helena cheers herself on with a train of uplifting thoughts:

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49 Richard Hillman, *William Shakespeare: The Problem Plays* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 67.

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie
Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky
Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull…
Who ever strove
to show her merit did miss her love? (1.1, 217-239)

Helena's assertive spirit is truly impressive —but, isn't *All's Well*'s development implying that this logic of single-minded unadulterated faith is only applicable to a fairytale world? Toward the end of this soliloquy, a thought of doubt does surface and cause Helena to shudder as she admits, "my project may deceive me...." Quickly she checks herself, and vows her determination once more with alacrity. ("But my intents are fixed and will not leave me.") Her admirable courage at the beginning of the expedition notwithstanding, it is worthwhile to pause and ask: has the unfolding of the play actually proved Helena was "deceived" by her "project"? No one puts this into words, but the sense of longing remains achingly intense even at the finish line of her arduous pursuit. Somehow, despite all the tasks done, all the terms enforced, and all the aims reached— true fulfillment just seems to be ever beyond her grasp.[50]

The haunting sense of nonfulfillment, as this essay has argued, lies deep in the composite texture of *All's Well*. Through a tortuous struggle, Helena pulls off a romance quest in a fallen world of disagreeable realities. The play's title, *All's Well That Ends Well*, registers what she has learned about the necessary concessions to life's disappointments. Certain things can't bear to be examined too closely—one needs to accept the undesirable bits (quietly sweeping them under the rug perhaps), and make do with less than one first hoped for.[51] Helena's movement from idealistic longing to frustration and compromise has been refracted into variant patterns echoing the main plot in the periphery of *All's Well*. Various minor characters have lamented the limitation of human judgment in man's post-lapsarian state. Because of the "incertain grounds" of human perception (3.2, 15), misjudgment and the mis-prizing of true worth are everywhere. One can't tell one's misfortunes from blessings. "How mightily sometimes we make us comforts of our losses!" sighs one young lord. "And how mightily some other times we drown our gain in tears!"

50 Susan Snyder, "'The King's not here': Displacement and Deferral in *All's Well That Ends Well*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 43 (Spring 1992), 29.

51 Gerard J. Gross, "The Conclusion of *All's Well That Ends Well*," *Studies in English Literature* 23 (1983), 276.

echoed the other (4.3, 63-65). And, in their gossips about Bertram's self-destructive follies, the two peers of Bertram throw up their hands that he should "in his proper stream overflow himself." Pity and fear lead them to deplore man's purblind poor judgment in general.

First Lord As we are ourselves, what things are we!

Second Lord Merely our own traitors. (4.3, 19-20)

Quite startlingly, this exclamation applies to Helena, too. Bertram and Paroles are both gulled and "crushed by a plot"; Helena pulls the wool over her own eyes and is "deceived" by her "project."

In the entire play, Bertram seems to attain a feeling of worthiness only through martial honor, but even that is devalued. The fact that Shakespeare should come up with a strangely anti-romantic war (which is nonexistent in the source story) most revealingly demonstrates his attempt to complement Helena's experience with yet another variant to the play's recurring pattern of "nonfulfillment." In spite of Bertram's keenness for entering the war and proving his manhood, the Italian War was introduced right from the beginning in a casual, slighting tone. The King has no intention of getting involved in this feud between the Florentines and Sienese, and freely allows his young lords to fight on either side of the dispute. The war is even compared to "a nursery" which will serve as a play ground for the young gentlemen "who are sick for breathing and exploit." The lack of justification deflates the glory of the war, and punctures Bertram's image as a war hero. The few allusions to this war in the play bring to our attention some peculiarly embarrassing accidents that accompany it. For instance, the Florentine cavalry Bertram leads, due to a mix-up in orders, ends up attacking its own infantry (3.6, 48-50). Then, the war hero goes home with a velvet patch on the face, but as the Clown's jest implies, it might conceal not a wound inflicted by sword, but a scar left by syphilis (4.5, 95-100). These debunking elements evidently are strong attacks on the glamour of this war, making it a parody of the epic combat in chivalrous days recalled so fondly by the old King. So, without a good cause, Bertram's martial pursuit is placed in a trivialized context, and the value of his hard-won battle discounted. Likewise, Helena's strenuous struggle to make a romance story out of unfit stuff—her dogged search for an idealized romance hero in an unvarnished, debased world—also brings into question whether this might be a wrong war to enter and whether it's only a pyrrhic victory that she has won.

At the close of the play, the audience has a clear sense of the intractability of human wills and recognizes that the greatest impediment to Helena's "project" lies in the dark unyielding heart. After all, love can neither be compelled, nor deserved,

and certainly not won by wiles.[52] Seeing that there isn't much of a chance for the predicament to sort itself out unaided, "Shakespeare has to place his finger on the scale and impose something on the narrative to give Helena a happy ending."[53] He makes the King hasten to give his conclusive words in a forced tone, drawing attention to the definite effort it requires for things to be forced to a decent end. Then, as if wary of the unfinished business in the shoddy ending, the King suddenly steps out of his role and, in the cajoling tone of an ingratiating actor, speaks an applause-seeking epilogue. The epilogue cues the audience to go along and bring about the comic ending, begging for their complicity in winking at the lumbering mechanism of the conventional comic plot. Flaunting the contrived nature of the resolution, *All's Well* closes with what Brecht would call an "alienation effect" and invites critical scrutiny of the tensions artificially contained by the happy end.[54] The enforced marriage between "conventional romance" and "psychological realism" often leaves the audience ambivalent and uneasy, but, as Anne Barton observes perceptively, the difficult feeling in the resolution could be something Shakespeare wants to emphasize, rather than to conceal.[55] For a play sometimes called "Shakespeare's most thorough experiment with comic form,"[56] the happy ending could have been willfully, blatantly manipulated in order to bring suspicion, rather than gratification. The tension between insuppressible romantic longings and darkly obstructing realities being the heart of the matter for the play, the dark shades of strain should be deemed *All's Well*'s definitive quality—and a fully intended effect.

52 For a discussion about how this idea bears upon the ethos of Shakespearean love comedy, see John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare and His Comedies*, 2nd ed (London, 1962), 187-88; Michael Shapiro, "'The Web of Our Life': Human Frailty and Mutual Redemption in *All's Well That Ends Well*," *JEGP*, 71(1972), 519.

53 R. S. White, *Let Wonder Seem Familiar*: *Endings in Shakespeare' Romance Vision* (London: Athlone Press, 1985), 82.

54 David Scott Kastan, "*All's Well That Ends Well* and the Limits of Comedy," *ELH*, 52 (1985),578.

55 Anne Barton, Introduction to *All's Well That Ends Well*, G. Blakemore Evans, ed., *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 499-503.

56 A. P. Riemer, *Antic Fables: Patterns of Evasion in Shakespeare's Comedies* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1980), 53-54.

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不幸的喜劇
——莎劇《善哉善了》陰影探源

謝 君 白*

摘 要

莎劇「問題喜劇」之一的《善哉善了》（*All's Well That Ends Well*）素以劇中突出的「壓力感」著稱。 不少批評家同意：這種特殊的壓力源自莎士比亞在本劇中嘗試的一種喜劇創作實驗。莎翁不但在原始素材的「傳奇情節」（romantic plot）中注入了「心理寫實」（psychological realism）的成份，而且把兩種成份的劑量同時大幅增強，彷彿刻意要它們彼此抵觸拉扯、營造出特殊效果。

透過一種光影交織的描摹（chiaroscuro），莎士比亞在《善哉善了》喜劇的圖案當中植入越來越深、越來越濃的陰影——以致於劇末的結局裡，男女主角雖終成眷屬，卻全無歡樂的亮彩，反而掩上一層壓抑著複雜心事的晦澀顏色。自十八世紀以來，《善哉善了》就被冠上了「不幸的喜劇」（the Unfortunate Comedy）這個別名。這個名號本來是因為它在劇場表演裡迭生事故而來；不過，衡量劇中幾乎淹沒了喜劇圖案的陰影、以及喜劇結局最終留下悵惘深深，用「不幸的喜劇」之名來總括本劇獨特的滋味倒也相當貼切。

莎翁到底運用了哪些特別的設計，讓原始素材裡活潑亮麗的民間故事變成了透露出勉強與不安、輸贏糾結、悲喜難言的一齣戲？這篇論文旨在針對《善哉善了》獨特的戲劇滋味作深入的觀察。論文關注的焦點集中在莎翁在劇中陰影營造的手法，尤其留意他在以下幾個方面的用心：（一）把「傳奇故事」的邏輯強加在「寫實描摹」的世界——增強劇中契合理想精神的「傳奇故事圖案」與悖離理想精神的「寫實干擾」相互拉鋸的張力；（二）把厚重的「心理寫實」塞進單薄的「傳奇故事」模子裡——運用高度逼真的心理刻畫突顯男女主角「根本上的不相配」；（三）讓背景圖案呼應主情節故事的訊息——嚮往無盡，圓滿難期。配角人物有關「人性缺陷」的嘲謔、感嘆此起彼落；主角人物的偏執與脆弱不再只是特例，戲劇主體的陰影隱然融入外圍一個普遍不完滿世界。

關鍵詞：莎士比亞　問題劇　善哉善了　喜劇形式實驗

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