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"Yet in His Idle Fire:" Once More unto the Bertram and *All's Well*

Abstract: As a bitter comedy, a dark comedy, and a problem play (all of these so-called), *All's Well* has suffered both neglect in the theater for most of its post-creation existence, and vilification from critics for over two centuries, especially in the twentieth. As a result, it is seldom taught and therefore even less often read. More's the pity, since the real *All's Well* is a most entertaining and otherwise rewarding play to experience in the theater and in the study, and far above its traditional status as a disappointment and even "a seedy, seamy affair." The conventional misreadings center on Bertram, the notorious bed-trick, the ending, and the tonality of the whole. The purpose here is to set these to rights and Helena into perspective as the script seems to present them, and identify this play as a special kind of near-romantic comedy that manages its dramatic vicissitudes so well that *All's Well* ends well indeed.

Keywords: *All's Well That Ends Well*, Bertram, festive comedy, fertility rites, page versus stage.

An epigraph from *All's Well* used in the June 1978 *Folger Library Newsletter*,

> … the time will bring on summer
> When briars shall have leaves as well as thorns,
> And be as sharp as sweet, (4.4.31-33)

gives rare emphasis to the sunny side of the briar patch. For "the reminder that *All's Well* is indeed a comedy is not unnecessary" (482), as Muriel St. Clare Byrne wrote in an admirable review of Tyrone Guthrie's hearty production at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 1959. *All's Well* is no more a bitter comedy than good girl gets middling boy is a cosmic anomaly, much less inevitably a tragedy. However, arguments to this effect have been too infrequent to deliver *All's Well*

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from the cellarage of its confinement by tradition, consensus, and teleological convenience. Even if it is brought forth from time to time to be judged anew as of old, to paraphrase Dr. Johnson of Bertram, the play has been "dismissed to darkness." Some mostly negative commentary includes essays by Martin Holmes (1972), Anne Barton (1974), John M. Love (1977), and Nicholas Brooke (1978), and a telling comment on a Stratford, Ontario, production in the Spring 1978 in *Shakespeare Quarterly*. The present essay stands in opposition, and I hope there will be others, though the critical history of the past two centuries (and decades) hardly gives one cause to be sanguine, despite the ample modern way-paving by both Byrne and Joseph G. Price in *The Unfortunate Comedy*.

The mighty opposites of the conventional contention are Dr. Johnson, as father of the sons of darkness, and Coleridge for the sons of light, and they are admirable epitomists. First, Dr. Johnson, in 1765:

> I cannot reconcile my heart to Bertram; a man noble without generosity, and young without truth; who marries Helen as a coward and leaves her as a profligate; when she is dead by his unkindness, sneaks home to a second marriage, is accused by a woman whom he has wronged, defends himself by falsehood, and is dismissed to happiness. (84)

Now Coleridge, in 1833:

> I cannot agree with the solemn abuse which the critics have poured out upon Bertram. … He was a young nobleman in feudal times, just bursting into manhood, with all the feelings of pride of birth and appetite for pleasure and liberty natural to such a character so circumstanced. Of course, he had never regarded Helena otherwise than as a dependent in the family; and of all that which she possessed of goodness and fidelity and courage, which might atone for her inferiority in other respects, Bertram was necessarily in a great measure ignorant. And after all, her *prima facie* merit was the having inherited a prescription from her old father the Doctor by which she cures the King—a merit which supposes an extravagance of personal loyalty in Bertram to make conclusive to him in such a matter as that of taking a wife. Bertram had surely good reason to look upon the King's forcing him to marry Helen as a very tyrannical act.[1] (253-254)

[1] Holmes emphasizes the potential tyranny in the obliquely negative treatment, as he sees it, of the institution and practices of the Court of Wards: "… in his [Shakespeare's] treatment of Bertram, and still more in the king, he contrives to show that the trouble is not the fault of the people concerned, but of the anachronism which they have to operate, or which does its part, by its influence, to make them what they are" (91).

As often, the difference of opinion centers on Bertram, whom Johnson could not reconcile his heart to, but he did not find *All's Well* gloomy. As Jonson observes, "This play has many delightful scenes, though not sufficiently probable, and some happy characters, though not new. … Parolles is a boaster and a coward, such as has always been the sport of the stage, but perhaps never raised more laughter or contempt than in the hands of Shakespeare" (84).

The inherited contention is interestingly expounded in a pair of discussions of *All's Well* in the theater, where it is frequently said to play much better than it reads in the study, a state of affairs always inviting some rethinking in the study. First, Muriel St. Clare Byrne (1959), who begins:

> It is ironical to reflect that this so-called "bitter comedy", one of the least liked and least known of the plays, has now been introduced to a mass-audience, who have possibly never heard of it and almost certainly never read it, as a play written to delight and entertain in a theater. Many thousands of these lucky people now start off with the right idea, like Bankside audiences who recognized that a play was a play and did not confuse it with the sermon at Paul's. They are not a coterie for plays unpleasant, any more than Shakespeare's audience was. (556)

And, written about two decades later, the comment on a production at Stratford, Ontario:

> "*All's Well*," lamented the *New York Post*, was "done as if it were one of the problem plays." Would that it had been. For some years now the problem plays have been encroaching on the romantic comedies; in David Jones's production matters went the other way. … Nicholas Pennell resisted the general wholesomeness, but he located a certain charm in Bertram, and his final "If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" seemed without reservation. A happy end, then, that took the title at face value. But in this concept there is no place for Lavatch the bitter fool. … For all its individual excellences, therefore, … I found the production unsatisfying. *All's Well* is a seedy, seamy affair, and David Jones resolutely turned his back on the blacker elements of the play. (Berry 222)

Or perhaps, as Guthrie had seen it, he saw it free of hoodwinking preconceptions.

In the present essay I want to comment on several aspects of the text and critical and theatrical contexts of *All's Well* that bear on our understanding of the play and invite a critical reorientation. I cannot sufficiently emphasize the need for detailed analysis, because, being unfashionable in recent years in overreaction against New Criticism (note those "no explication" signs at sundry journal doors), it is all the more needed to question the stock impressionisms that constitute the litany of orthodox maledictions. For example, of Bertram's

exposure in 5.3 one reads: "he turns and twists, lies and calumniates, providing an entirely realistic demonstration of just how far he can go in prevarication and meanness," etc. (Barton 502). I have been tempted to make a collection of the unheroic epithets accorded the luckless Bertram over the years, but I leave that for the future, or to some other candidate for the company of collectors in the *Dunciad.* A few lines later the same writer adds: "In terms of psychological truth, there is no more reason for Bertram to accept Helena because of the bed-trick than because of the miraculous healing of the King" (Barton 502). This seems to me peremptory and gratuitous. Without suggesting the preeminence of country matters in the case, I should suggest that there is, in the ramifications of the bed-trick, one of the more usual if not better reasons on earth; and that there is a world of difference for Bertram between the King's miraculous healing (three cheers! of course) and his own amorous experience, which he might care to spend a lifetime sharing.

As Muriel St. Clare Byrne comments, Guthrie's production, and the ages' audiences suggest, there must be institutional obstacles to seeing such plays steady and seeing them whole, and it is not difficult to suggest pertinent teleological fallacies. The most usual, perhaps, involve the searches for high seriousness, for a play's genre and place in a subset of a large canon like Shakespeare's; for a particular quality according with its chronological place and its real or fancied affinities with plays supposed written just before and after; and for an inferred Shakespearean version of the satirical thrust in much contemporary Jacobethan literature. But there is an entropic effect in the resulting certitudes. Who does not read Aristotle's comment—out of context—on the evolution of tragedy with something of a sinking heart? "Having passed through many changes, it found its natural form, and there it stopped" (*Poetics* 4.12; 1449a: 14-15).

Such teleologies have passed through good evidence and sound reasoning to a persuasive chronology, and even to a well-ordered canon of types of drama, from the early (and romantic) comedies through the joyous comedies and dark comedies to the romances; for example—a representation that has been modified only somewhat by C. L. Barber's study of *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy.* But the comforts of convenience and established order have negative aspects of complacency and worse. The short of it all is that much of what continues to be said about *All's Well* owes less to fresh observation of the play than to its well- or rather ill-established status, even caste, as an inferior, largely, and for many, just as well unread, dark or bitter comedy and problem play written in 1602-04 as the second member of a quasi-trilogy, with its predecessor, *Troilus and Cressida,* and its successor, *Measure for Measure,* both superior. In other words, a born-again loser. To my way of reading, as well as Guthrie's way of producing, there is something definitely amiss in that dismissal; but *All's Well's* history has established it as a play that more than most lives a double life,

of Jekyll (when it is lucky) on the stage and of Hyde in the study, where it is rendered monstrous by critics considering too curiously. A game of seek and Hyde, it would appear.

Whatever the final judgement, the usual points of disagreement are well within the range of mortal ken: they are the character of Bertram, the bed-trick, the particular question whether the play ends well, and the general question of its predominating tone or, in R. A. Foakes's useful term and notion, *tonality*, which he defines as "the dramatic shaping of the action, or what I sometimes call the tonality of the play, the pattern of expectations established by the sum of relations existing between the parts of the action at any given point" (5). In *Comedy High and Low* Maurice Charney identifies one of the sources of contention: "It is unfashionable… to resist the proposition that all comedy aspires to the condition of tragedy. We must reject the glib assumption that comedy is a lesser form of art and experience that somehow needs to be ennobled and completed by tragedy. Dramatic criticism usually hunts out ways in which comedy may lay claim to darker overtones and a tragic coloring. Shakespeare's 'problem' *comedies—Measure for Measure, Troilus and Cressida, All's Well That Ends Well—are* conventionally praised for the wrong reasons, and their supposed resemblance to tragedy immediately elevates their status in the Shakespearean canon" (Charney 174-175). In many a current view of Shakespeare's comedies, the plays are like Frost's woods, "lovely, dark, and deep," and lovely because dark and deep, the darker the deeper, and the lovelier.

Obviously, one might begin to restore the balance to our perspective by taking some account of *All's Well* as comical comedy. Whether comedy is "between" romance and satire, as Northrop Frye says it is, its association with risibility persists in all but the most somber treatments of the subject. And—Charney again—, "Just as tragedies end in death, so comedies typically end in marriage" (88), which for long was thought the type of the happy ending, not a prelude to divorce. What makes a traditional comedy a *fête accomplie* is a pleasing ending in the same key as its major antecedents, such that the whole is a harmony of varied and generally agreeable parts.[2] *All's Well* is such a comedy: it ends well in keeping with promises made earlier, and it is predominantly agreeable in design, controls, and effect. We might even take a measure by seeing what proportion of it is—yes—"funny;" that is, how much of it is downright, laughter-inducing, amusing, or wry. One can hardly be exact in such matters, but I found that some 38-42% of its 3,013 lines are individually or cumulatively comic in the generally understood sense of the term. By contrast, for example, with so comical a comedy as *The Comedy of Errors*, with 46% of its 1,787 lines comical, and a *great* deal of its humor in stage-business

[2] I leave out of consideration "black" comedy and other kinds with modifying terms, which speak for themselves.

and sight-gags. Therefore, there is substantial comic matter in thirteen to sixteen, and in the longer, of its twenty-three scenes, by contrast with ten of eleven scenes in *The Comedy of Errors*; and there is particularly concentrated comedy later in the play, in act 4, with the crushing of Parolles by a plot.

I am well aware that this is deep—or shallow—water, but readers of good will may be prepared to look at the play again on the basis of so quixotic and provocative a tilting.[3] By this measure, if sound, *All's Well* contains almost a third more comic dialogue than *Errors*. If *All's Well* seems substantially less comic than *Errors*, it is partly because the humor is not so broad. Moreover, much of *All's Well* that is not directly comic is concerned with the romantic girl-and-boy-get-each-other plot that is both primary and developed in extenso; the counterpart in *Errors* is rudimentary. *All's Well* in fact has pronounced affinities with a number of plays it is not usually compared with, except invidiously. When looked at up-close, it will be seen to be funny first and, often, "serious" only as virtually nothing comic fails to contain a serious component, correlative, or implication: life is no laughing matter, but local tonality is a matter of relative balance and immediate effect, not of residual contemplative value. Finally, the comedy in *All's Well* is distributed throughout a long play, despite the concentration in act 4, and it is found in every act. It begins in 1.1, with Parolles's and Helena's colloquy on virginity, a subject still serious in most perspectives, but with fine potentialities for comical excess. For example, while writing this essay I ran across the following opening in a newspaper column: "On the first day of eighth grade Pat Fertig announced that, in furtherance of her firm intention to be a virgin bride, she would no longer occupy a desk adjacent to that of Murchison the magician. 'His voice has changed,' Pat declared. 'That means puberty (Pat's father was a doctor) and I'm looking out for Number One. It's a challenge Murchison couldn't ignore. He's swiped everything else I own'" (Batson 1B). If the three scenes I allow to be doubtful are as comic as I think they are (2.1; 4.2, the seduction scene; and 5.3, the concluding scene), then the play *ends* with a considerable comic flourish, too, even without taking into account the epilogue, as practically no one does and I therefore mean to be.[4]

How *pervasively* droll *All's Well's* comic goings-on can be is all too often neglected or even unnoticed. For example, in an instance of the intermittent burlesque of affected courtly conversation that so well suits a play in part on *gentilesse* 2.2, entirely a comic duologue between the Countess and the

[3] I find comic matter in the following scenes of *AWW* (* = entire comic scenes; [ ] = scenes many do not find comic): 1.1, 3; 2.[1], 2*, 3-4; 3.2, 5, 6*; 4.1*, [2], 3, 5; 5.2, [3]. By acts I find numbers of comic lines as follows: 202 in act 1, 330-79 in 2, 152 in 3, 410-86 in 4, and 52 in 5 (excluding scene 3, much of which others find comic, too, however), for a total of 1,158+ comic lines.

[4] Prominently comic are 2/3 of act 1, 4/5 or all 5 of act 2, 3/7 of act 3, 3/5 or 4/5 of act 4, and 1/3 or 2/3 of act 5. 2.2, 3.6, and 4.1 are entirely comic.

Clown, begins with thematic matter: "Come on, sir; I shall now put you to the height of your breeding (2.2.1-2)."[5] The Clown says he has, by way of serviceable courtly conversation, "an answer that will serve all men" (2.2.12-13), and invites the Countess to question him; first, "ask me if I am a courtier" (2.2.35). To her every question he then replies "O Lord, sir" (2.2.40; 43; 45; 47; 52; 57), with varying gestures and inflections. A stock comic catechism, in design. What gives it special piquancy (and also didactic force) is the following scene, where, amid the talk of Helena's miraculous cure of the King, Parolles inadvertently plays the clown to Bertram and Lafew's interlocutor. Whatever their observations, he portentously puts in, "So say I" (2.3.11), "Right; so I say" (2.3.13), "So say I" (2.3.15), "So would I have said" (2.3.19), and so on.

This buffoonery is wonderfully ludicrous in context, and is also a type of much successful yespersonship in real life that consists in reflexive and liturgical assents of no more content. Nor is that the last of it. In 4.3, at the height of his baiting and the point of his unhooding, hearing his captor's command, "Come, headsman, off with his head" (4.3.298), Parolles exclaims, "O Lord, sir, let me live, or let me see my death!" (4.3.299). Aside from whatever he may have contributed to the epigrammatic bravado of Patrick Henry, Parolles's feverish "O Lord, sir" has a comical Shakespearean trenchancy and breadth of the play's very own, one fully prepared for in 2.2-3.

All's Well is a fusion of romance and realism, folklore and factuality, magic and pragmatics, in which Helena, the poor but artful physician's daughter, is the central figure who wins a husband twice, once in form by curing the ailing King and again in fact by turning a trick that fulfills a nearly impossible condition. To her good angel and Parolles's bad, Bertram is a rebellious Morality Everyboy who comes to show executive and military skill ("leadership ability") in his flight from the miseries of enforced marriage and is reconciled to his imaginative and energetic wife all but in spite of himself at play's end. The play is also something of a *Bildungs-spiel* in court, and courtiership, implicitly for Helena (at A level), explicitly for Bertram (at O level), who is pointedly given the character of an "unseason'd courtier" early in scene 1. The vicissitudinous romance is the primary plot, and Bertram is the fly in the web or, as many think, the ointment. Aside from these formal identities, however, Bertram is something of an enigma, and his character, significance, and value in the play are the major bone of contention for almost all contenders.

[5] The text cited is Hunter's New Arden edition. References to acts, scenes and lines will be given parenthetically in the text. The usual speech-prefix for Lavatch (Lavache) —a name used only once in the text, at 5.2.1—is "Clown," which suggests a different characterization from that of "Lavatch the bitter fool" typically found in dark readings of the play. It might be of interest in this connection that in recent colloquial Parisian usage, "*vachement bien*" is a phrase of approval.

A major source of difficulty is that Bertram is not among the primary characters in exposure and dialogue as he is in psychology, plot, and station. The spotlight of the play is rather on Helena, and after her on others well before it falls on Bertram. His position in *All's Well* is very much like that of Cressida—as Troilus's is of Helena—in *Troilus and Cressida*, structurally, and some elementary statistics suggest more affinity otherwise between *All's Well* and *Troilus* than between *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure,* with which it is usually mated—because of the shared bed-trick, usually.[6] Although Bertram has his proponents, including me, none is prepared to claim more for him than partial achievement and maturity, and the promise of much more, at play's end, not even Albert Howard Carter writing "In Defense of Bertram"—unfortunately (and unnecessarily) at Helena's expense (23). Arguments in favor of a potentially worthy—and comic—Bertram are basically three. First, that the shortcomings of adolescence—especially fictional aristocratic and fairy-tale adolescence—are not mortal sins. Byrne speaks to this:

> Edward de Souza's Edwardian Bertram's appearance and manner are exactly right—the right kind of male good looks, very, very young, still with undergraduate-level masculine and aristocratic self-conceit, cut exactly to the conventional pattern, as gullible and selfish as they come, the type that is always taken in by knowingness, the flattering and the man-of-the-world swagger of a Parolles and mentally about twenty years younger than Helena. He has a case—the case of the young, coerced male. It is possible that young William Shakespeare knew something of this resentment, by experience as well as observation. Mr. de Souza and his producer make such case as there is. He is too normal to be basically unlikeable: one simply has to wait for him to grow up. We see the beginning of this chastening process—no more. … (Byrne 562)

The association of Bertram's with Shakespeare's youthful situation is daring and brilliant, and, I think, a suggestion also apt.

The second argument is that sketching Bertram as a somewhat shadowy secondary places the focus on Helena, whose strength, virtues, and percipience

[6] I give here the figures for these three plays and *Othello* (percentage of words):

Tro.			*AWT*	*MM*			*Oth.*
Troilus	**15.5**	**16**	**Helena**	**Duke**	**31**	**32.5**	**Iago**
Ulysses	14	13	Parolles	Isabella	14	24	Othello
Pandarus	12	13	King	Angelo	11	10.5	Desdemona
Thersites	9	10	Lafew	Lucio	11	7.5	Cassio
Cressida	**8**	9.5	Countess	Escalus	6.5	7	Emilia
Hector	6	**9**	**Bertram**	Pompey	6	4	Brabantio
	64.5	70.5			79.5	85.5	

compel a benefit of doubt in favor of her love of Bertram, confer an imputed grace upon him, and invite us to act in the spirit of her own acceptance of Parolles: she *knows* "him a notorious liar, / Think[s] him a great way fool, solely a coward" (1.1.98-99); yet as she says, "I love him for his [Bertram's] sake" (1.1.97).

The third argument follows from the second: virtually everyone in and out of the play comes to know Parolles for a fool and coward, including himself, and treats him accordingly. By contrast, Bertram's youthful faults are shown glittering and seen for what they are, and all the virtuous principals hold him dear and retain or even enlarge their hopes for him. As Jay L. Halio puts it, "all evidence indicates our acceptance of Bertram at the end is intended" (43).

Two prominent means by which Shakespeare *dramatically* justifies Bertram are (1) a very important boys-will-be-boys speech by Helena and pattern of reinforcement related to it; and (2) the calculated credibility of Diana's "lightness" that makes Bertram's alarums and excursions in Act V far less reprehensible than they are usually made out to be; in fact, in such half realistically, half comically bizarre circumstances, even reasonable. The first naturalizes his giving a treasured family heirloom for a song, or entertainment rather better; the second makes him a youth apparently as much sinned against as sinning, and very comically so. Helena to Diana's mother, the Widow (3.7.17-28):

> The count he woos your daughter,
> Lays down his wanton siege before her beauty,
> Resolv'd to carry; let her in fine consent
> As we'll direct her how 'tis best to bear it.
> Now his important blood will naught deny
> That she'll demand; a ring the county wears
> That downward hath succeeded in his house
> From son to son some four or five descents
> Since the first father wore it. This ring he holds
> In most rich choice; yet, in his idle fire,
> To buy his will it would not seem too dear,
> Howe'er repented after.

This speech is a sharp instrument for undoing some of the knots in the mingled yarn of *All's Well*, not least in the unobtrusive siege imagery that is more than conventionally Petrarchan in this context, where it identifies one order of attempted conquest with another and helps to balance out their psychological kinship, if not their credit, in youthful Renaissance endeavor. Most important—for us in effect—is Helena's understanding and acceptance of Bertram's readiness to yield the ring for pleasure, "Howe'er repented after" (3.7.28).

The attitude speaks for itself as the play's, as well as Helena's, since she is both ethically normative and psycho-dramatically the thrice-aggrieved party:

abandoned, confronted with Bertram's favors proffered to another, and obliged to seek her rights by feigning another's wrongs. She takes it all cheerfully, and she designs, directs, stage-manages, and acts the business of the bed-trick in the same spirit. This treatment makes the bed-trick welcome and allows it to be amusing first and touching later. She knows her histrionic craft and "female wiles" well, and communicates conviction succinctly: "let her [Diana] in fine consent / As we'll direct her how 'tis best to bear it" (3.5.19-20). A point to be made in this connection is that, while Bertram's self-abandon is related to the spirit of "lust in action" in Sonnet 129 and the "*young* affects" Othello says are "defunct" in him, it is broadly comedized throughout the play, which makes a partly mocking celebration of the sexual senses and their mores in relation both to national customs and to the cunning of the sexes as traditionally viewed.

The sequence of comic events centering on the bed-trick has its initiation in 2.1, its detailed preparation in 3.5 and 3.7, its metabasis in the seduction scene (4.2), its climactic comic incident in the off-stage bedding of the lovers (between 4.2 and 4.3), and its frantic denouement in 5.3, when "wronged" mother and daughter arrive at Rousillion to betray Bertram's tilth and husbandry, and everyone is finally made to see the light on Helena's arrival.[7] (It may not be coincidental that ἑλένη is a torch.) This sequence is not strictly a plot, but it is an interwoven course of centrally important events, and failure to recognize and read it as such is a primary source of misunderstanding both of the tonality of the entire play and of Bertram's place in it. In brief, what happens is this. Bertram and we—playfully—are prepared to see Italian girls as especially guileful, for early on the King warns,

> Those girls of Italy, take heed of them;
> They say our French lack language to deny
> If they demand; beware of being captives
> Before you serve.
>
> (2.1.19-22)

Bertram is presented as a lusty, red-blooded young French lord who "corrupts a well-derived nature" with "the inducement" of Parolles, "a very tainted fellow, and full of wickedness" (3.2.87-89). In Florence, with the Pandarous assistance and direction of Parolles, he attempts to seduce a young Florentine woman, Diana. He is at first unsuccessful, but on giving her a ring "in his idle fire" (3.7.26) she "in fine consents" (3.7.19), and he is at once given an appointment and instructions for an assignation that is duly kept and enthusiastically

[7] The following scenes and lines, especially, constitute or bear on this sequence: 2.1.19-22, 3.2.87-89, 3.5.1-100 (entire), 3.6.106-12, 3.7.1-47 (entire), 4.2.1-75 (the seduction scene, entire), 4.3.13-33 and 88-94, 4.4.1-36 (entire), 5.1.1-38 (indirectly: Helena's progress), and 5.3 passim.

conducted. From Diana's Eve-like "sweet reluctant amorous delay," followed by her ready willingness to go to bed with him on payment of a ring, Bertram would have reason to suppose her a super-subtle Florentine and "common gamester of the camp" (5.3.187) from whom for a priceless ring he "had that which any inferior might / At market-price have bought," as he later explains (5.3.217-218).

In act V (again at Helena's instigation and direction), Diana and the widow arrive at Rousillion to claim Bertram as obligated fiancé, and he might well suppose he was being trapped and in danger of being victimized for life by whore and bawd intent upon making their fortune through his husbandry. He reacts accordingly, and in time even the King is brought to see Diana as a "common gamester" (5.3.187), at which point Helena arrives and saves the day she scripted for the purpose. These dizzying forthrights and meanders are typical Shakespearean end-play *Rashomon*isms, and we are tacitly invited to learn from them as well as be taken in by them, even like the characters themselves. The unraveling of deceptive complications is always epistemologically enlightening as well as immediately satisfying. In 3.7, Helena's assurances and counsel to the widow prepare us fully for the seduction scene and the bed-trick:

> … it is no more
> But that your daughter, ere she seems as won,
> Desires this ring; appoints him an encounter;
> In fine, delivers me to fill the time. (3.7.30-33)

And the widow is convinced:

> I have yielded.
> Instruct my daughter how she shall persever
> That time and place with this deceit so lawful
> May prove coherent. (3.7.36-39)

Thus, the very seduction scene itself is or can be finely comic, and the bed-trick, so far from being the squalid tryst at the center of "a seedy, seamy affair" it is often made out to be, is in retrospect a wholly pleasing—if partly inadvertent—honeymoon. In any case, the imagination must supply the gestures and the values, for this is off-stage business but Helena surely supplies the key in her latterly "O my good lord, when I was like this maid / I found you wondrous kind" (5.3.303-304).

The seduction scene (4.2) is, in fact, a masterpiece of mockery of amorous behavior of various kinds, and effects a wonderful crossing of purposes. It begins with "They told me that your name was Fontybell" (4.2.1). We do not know who "they" is, but they sound like military boasters and traducers, and we have no reason to suppose that Bertram is making this up. It is a touch of the "stag-party set-up," in Byrne's phrase (567). Did Parolles tell him that her

name was Fontybell, et cetera? Very like him to do so, since he "reports but coarsely" of Helena (3.5.57). Bertram's attempted seduction is full of pseudo-commitments of a kind well understood by the women of the play:

> My mother told me just how he would woo
> As if she sat in's heart. She says all men
> Have the like oaths. He had sworn to marry me
> When his wife's dead. … (4.2.69-72)

and Diana's responses could easily be taken as a tactically delaying come-on. On Bertram's part, the emotional tone of the scene is one of rising eagerness, from "How have I sworn!" (4.2.20) to the coquettish fencing over the ring, which he tries to hold back because it is "an honour 'longing to our house" (4.2.42). But, when she replies, "Mine honour's such a ring; / My chastity's the jewel of our house" (4.2.45-46), potentially with seductive overtones and gestures, Bertram is conquered merely: "Here, take my ring; / My house, mine honour, yea my life be thine, / And I'll be bid by thee" [! surely] (4.2.51-53). The stage-comic possibilities of these lines of surrender are rich indeed, and it is surprising that editors seem so easily to resist at least one exclamation point (*The Riverside Shakespeare* has one in "ring!"). As soon as the ring is given, Diana is brisk and professional: "When midnight comes, knock at my chamber window; / I'll order take my mother shall not hear" (4.2.54-55), and so on; and Bertram has only one more—enraptured—line in the scene: "A heaven on earth I have won by wooing thee" (4.2.66), at which point in Guthrie's production Guthrie "was prepared to commit himself to" the widow's "gorgeous, absent-minded automatic" "'Enter with a glass of milk'" (Byrne 567), a refreshment of Guthrie's invention more or less at the opposite end of a dish of prunes. In the play as written, the widow plays no such part, and Diana's bitter-sweet soliloquy balances delicately between a touching disillusion and comical hyperbole. It is not long before the King is seeking a husband for Diana, who here says "Marry that will, I live and die a maid" (4.2.74).

Seeking fun with Fontybell in Florentine Diana's arms, Bertram finds his unknown-lawful satisfaction with Helena his wife, unknown to be herself. After the encounter, in 4.4 Helena looks at once ahead and back in a reflective speech that is the complement of her "idle fire" speech. Especially striking is the subtle association of heaven itself with the bed-trick, as Diana assures the widow,

> Doubt not but heaven
> Hath brought me up to be your daughter's dower,
> As it hath fated her to be my motive
> And helper to a husband; (4.4.18-21)

Certainly, heaven helps those who help themselves, we note, but the rhetorical effect of the association remains. She goes on to reflect upon a paradox that effectively justifies Bertram's misconduct by the miscarriage of his wicked intention and his obliviously happy fulfillment of her coalescent virtuous one:

> … O strange men!
> That can such sweet use make of what they hate,
> When saucy trusting of the cozen'd thoughts
> Defiles the pitchy night; so lust doth play
> With what it loathes for that which is away.
> (4.4.21-25)

A "how understand we that?" speech (1.1.56), at first glance or hearing, if ever there was one, with a gustatory base in "sweet use" (4.4.22) and "saucy trusting" (4.4.23). Sweet and sour sex, in short. Helena is commenting with general reference on Bertram's particular situation, and on the pair of paradoxes proceeding from his imagined adultery with Diana: he gladly made love with Helena unrecognized, whom recognized he hates; and he "defiles the pitchy night" (4.4.24) only by design and supposition, not at all in fact.

Two additional matters that bear significantly on a revised view of the play are Bertram's final couplet and the epilogue. The constructions put on the couplet, "If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (5.3.309-310), would make an interesting study in themselves. The possible variations are legion, but the recurrent themes are two: most commonly, the couplet is taken as arrogant and refractory; rarely, it is received as wondering and reconciliatory. It is virtually impossible not to notice the close parallel between this and the analogous couplet in the seduction scene, "Say thou art mine, and ever / My love as it begins shall so persever" (4.2.36-37), but some see them as alike and negative in implication; some, like me, as contrasting and finally positive. On the negative side, Nicholas Brooke puts it this way, in part: "… the flattened affirmation restores something of the false confidence with which Bertram began this scene, assuring the King of his love for Lafew's daughter; still more, its double (feminine?) rhymes recall the equally awful couplet in which Bertram declared his faith to Diana" just quoted (Brooke 79).

By contrast, Warner Berthoff remarks that Bertram's "final couplet accepting Helena is notorious for appearing to make his submission dependent on still further disclosures. … But I see no reason not to read that 'If' as adjunctive rather than conditional, which changes sense and tone entirely. The lines, moreover, double the rhymed 'ever' of his earlier vow" (345 n23). A sort of middle ground is occupied by Martin Holmes: the couplet "must not come out judicially, as if it were to be followed by the words 'but not otherwise.' … The

one person, it seems, who can explain everything is the much injured but apparently still loving Helena, and it is to her, even while addressing the king, that he appeals for that explanation, of which he is in such desperate need. All is well ended, says the playwright, but if so, it is no thanks to the system"—of the Court of Wards, primarily (Holmes 91).

Though he has its significance wrong, I think, Brooke is right to emphasize the connection—properly seen as one of contrast—between the "vow" made to Diana in the seduction scene, which is manifestly equivocal, and the vow of reconciliation in this very different context, where it is in effect a promissory "Wow!" He is also right to query if not explain "(feminine?)" (Brooke 79). There well may be a designed contrast between the self-indulgent "effeminacy" of Bertram's earlier willful conduct and deceitful wooing of Diana, and his later display of a degree of civilizing "femininity" and surrender when he recognizes that Helena has won, he has "lost" (5.3.62), and both are one. All three of his lines have feminine endings, whereas Helena's enclosing *heroic* couplets—at either side of Bertram's speech—are triumphantly masculine: "this is done; / … you are doubly won" (5.3.307-308) and "If it appear not plain and prove untrue / Deadly divorce step between me and you!" (5.3.311-312).

It will bear and repay notice that there is also a significant parallel between these and "Helena's" earlier lines delivered by Diana in the seduction scene:

> … on your finger in the night I'll put
> Another ring, that what in time proceeds
> May token to the future our past deeds.
> Adieu till then; then, fail not. You have *won*
> A wife of me, though there my hope be *done.*
> (4.2.61-66)

Promise and fulfillment yet once more. A properly comic and romantic finale for a pursuit of the type that used to be expressed with folk-jocularity as "he chased her till she caught him," which, as Byrne hints, was Shakespeare's case with Anne Hathaway. We have the bed-trick added here to complicate the chase, but that is a given fact of fiction.

All's Well ends penultimately with the King's tonic speech and finally with an epilogue that is very much and importantly a *captatio benevolentiae* which unites role-players on and off the stage with genial Shakespearean ambiguities.

> The king's a beggar, now the play is done;
> All is well ended if this suit be won,
> That you express content; which we will pay

> With strife to please you, day exceeding day.
> Ours be your patience then and yours our parts;
> Your gentle hands lend us and take our parts. (Epilogue 1-5)

The charming last line offers a fair exchange, indeed, in a favorite hands-and-hearts conjunction undoubtedly to be sealed by the on- and off-stage business of the player's taking audience hands. Thus, this epilogue ends in much the same spirit, terms, and gestures as *A Midsummer Night's Dream:* "Give me your hands, if we be friends, / And Robin will restore amends" (5.1.423-424). If the fine's the crown, then this cheerful epilogue strongly argues that there should be any but a rueful smile in the countenance of this play.[8]

Two concluding observations seem in order, one general, tonal, and "neoteleological"; the other thematic and structural. The first is that, if *All's Well* is not "strictly" a festive comedy, it is also far more richly entertaining than the dramatic fast it is often made out to be. In a spirit of reconciliation of my own, then, I should suggest that *All's Well* be new-christened a "ferial comedy," with or without its usual siblings, because it is nearer the festive than the fasting and it may as well be calendared as such.

The second is that *All's Well* could be epitomized in the following mythopoetic terms. A fertility rite sets the King's fertility or at least his vitality right, leading to a marital fertility rite infertile until Helena sets her own and Bertram's fertility right by getting herself with child by him, whose wild oats of self-conceit turn out to be fruitfully domestic after all. In this relation, the play's title conceals a significant conundrum conveying the pan-Helenic action, and it helpfully anagrammatizes into a condensed expression of a major causal sequence: all swell that end swell. Fixing the King's fistula as the folk-tale precondition, Helena qualifies for marriage, shares the enjoyment of consummation and conception, in due course becomes great with Bertram's child, and as far as they or we can tell, all yet ends well. That was the end, and that is well. "Whate'er the course, the end is the renown" (4.4.36).

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[8] Eugene M. Waith has an interesting essay on epilogues in "'Give Me Your Hands:' Reflections on the Author's Agents in Comedy" (197-211). MND, *AYL,* and *Tempest* are discussed on pp. 200-04.

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