

2015

Grand Valley Shakespeare Festival

**All's Well That Ends
Well**

Teaching Materials For Schools

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NOTES ABOUT THE PLAY

The Story...

In Rossillion, the newly widowed Countess grows increasingly fond of a virtuous young woman named Helena, the recently orphaned daughter of a famous physician. Helena is secretly in love with the Countess's son, Bertram, but knows she cannot declare her love, for she is just a common girl, and he is the noble son of her patroness.

With his father now buried, Bertram is heading off to serve the King of France, and Helena is heartbroken to see him leave. The King is desperately ill of a dreaded disease, so Helena, with the Countess's blessing, follows Bertram to Paris where she cures the King with her dead father's magical remedy.

As a reward for saving the King's life, Helena asks in return the chance to marry the man of her choosing—Bertram. But Bertram objects to the marriage and escapes it by joining the army and running away to war with his friends, including his favorite, the flashy but untrustworthy Parolles.

In leaving, Bertram presents Helena with two impossible tasks to perform: She must get the ring from his finger and conceive with him a child before he will accept her as his wife. So Helena too leaves home disguising herself as a pilgrim, and ends up meeting another virtuous young woman, Diana, whom Bertram is trying to seduce.

As the bonds of male friendship strain under the weight of dishonesty and cowardice, the strength of sisterhood seems to grow until, in the end, all just might be able to end well.

The Characters

The Countess of Rossillion— Mother of Bertram, and adoptive mother of Helena. A strong and complicated woman, who runs her household without a man now that her husband has died. She is very fond of Helen and sympathizes with her love for Bertram.

Critic Marjorie Garber writes that the Countess is "brilliant, complicated, [and] strong," and George Bernard Shaw famously said that the Countess is "the most beautiful old woman's part ever written." We see a tender side of the countess when she overhears Helen talking about her love for Bertram: *'Even so it was with me when I was young: ~~the~~ ^{s,} ~~we~~ ^{we} are nature' ours; this thorn ~~oth~~ ^{oth} to our rose of youth rightly belong"* (1.3.19). The countess may be an old woman, but she remembers what it was like to be

young and in love. She also remembers just how painful it can be. It's not every day that you see one of Shakespeare's parents siding with the younger generation, especially in a love match involving partners of unequal social status.

Bertram – The Countess' only son, and the new Count of Rossillion, he is the man of Helena's dreams. He proves to be a valiant soldier, and he is well-liked, but he objects to being married to Helena because she is beneath him in status, which makes him seem like a snob. He also makes mistakes such as trusting Parolles, behaving like a "player," seducing the virginal Diana, and then trying to lie his way out of tight spots. A complicated leading man in many ways, Bertram's journey in the play is one of growing up.

Helena –The play's heroine, the orphaned daughter of a poor but famous physician, Helena has been adopted by the Countess of Rossillion, and is in love with Bertram. In the play, she cures the Queen of France's deadly disease and is rewarded by being allowed to choose any husband she wants. In this and many other ways, Helena challenges traditional Elizabethan attitudes about gender and sexuality, which say that good girls should be chaste, obedient, and silent. It's clear from the beginning of the play that Helena doesn't plan on being any of these things. She performs a miracle, chooses her own husband, then goes on a journey that leads her to an opportunity to win her husband a second time. Throughout the play, Helena wins over everybody's heart, forms bonds of sisterhood that help her in her quest, and basically does what we all expect of a traditional male hero.

The Queen of France—When the play opens, she's dying of an illness that no doctor has been able to cure. When Helena comes along and offers her services, the Queen at first resists, but then gives in and is cured. Like the Countess, the Queen can't help but love Helena, and she is appalled by Bertram's rejection of her.

Parolles—A braggart coward, friend to Bertram, who winds up betraying all of his friends to save his own skin. Watch this guy: he is funny and gets himself into a serious trap.

Lord Lafew—An outspoken nobleman, friend to the Countess, and trusted advisor at the Queen's court. In the play, Lafew acts as a kind of spokesperson for the older generation's ideals and values, and he is always harping on the younger generation of men for being immature and shallow. Lafew values honor, virtue, and honesty above all else, which is why he absolutely hates Parolles.

Lavatch—The Countess's clown, a licensed fool, which means he's sort of like a personal comedian and messenger. He is free to say whatever he wants without

getting into trouble. Lavatch is a bit like **Feste** from *Twelfth Night* and **Touchstone** from *As You Like It*. As this play's official clown, Lavatch's function is to crack jokes, make fun of all the other characters, and entertain the audience with his witty and philosophical observations.

Critic Jonathan Bate calls Lavatch "Shakespeare's most cynical and lascivious fool." In other words, Lavatch is incredibly "horny," *and* he has a bad attitude about life, and he can say anything he wants without being punished.

Diana—The young, virginal woman whom Bertram tries to seduce. She ends up tricking him into sleeping with Helena instead. In the final scene, Diana bravely stands up to the Queen in order to bring Bertram to justice and to help Helena achieve her goal.

A Widow—Diana's mother, an innkeeper. In the play, she helps Helena by letting her daughter participate in the "bed trick" (the trick that involves Diana pretending she's going to sleep with Bertram but substituting Helena instead.)

Mariana—An outspoken friend and neighbor to Diana and her mother, who helps form the group of women who ultimately save the day. When someone mentions Parolles' name, she yells out with gusto: "I know that knave, hang him!" [3.5.2].

The Brothers Dumaine—Two brothers in the Queen of France's court who join the army along with a bunch of other young noblemen and run off to fight a war in Italy. They're both good pals with Bertram, and they play a major role in the plot to expose Parolles.

Soldier Interpreter—He creates a fake language and manages the unmasking of Parolles.

Steward—In the Countess of Rossillion's court, another representative of the older generation.

Answers to some questions you might have about the play...

When was this play written?

Written somewhere between 1603-1605, *All's Well* comes after the great comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*,

Twelfth Night, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, which means that Shakespeare had already mastered the comic form and did indeed know how to write a happy ending to leave an audience thoroughly satisfied with romantic love that triumphs over all obstacles. So we have to assume that Shakespeare was aiming at a different kind of experience in *All's Well*, something more like real life, perhaps, where complexity and compromise, pragmatism and reality more often determine the ending, and nothing is as tidy and resolved as we wish it were. The “bed trick” in which one woman is substituted for another in the dark to trick a man into consummating the “correct” relationship rather than the inappropriate one was common enough on the early modern stage. Both of Shakespeare’s plays *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well* (written at about the same time) use this plot device, and both plays seem uncomfortable with the traditional happy ending, leaving unresolved questions and expectations where smiles and laughter (and dancing) might have sufficed in the earlier comedies.

How does *All's Well That Ends Well* fit in with Shakespeare’s other plays?

Although clearly built on a comic structure, following the struggles of a young couple to achieve wedded bliss, *All's Well That Ends Well* has been grouped with other plays like *Measure for Measure* as a “problem play” because it refuses to conform to the expectations (like the hope for a happy ending) it encourages in its audience. In addition, the play dramatizes some of the crucial social problems of Shakespeare’s time, including the tensions between older and younger generations, between men and women, and between different social classes, making it a play more about unresolved problems than about the smooth working out of a romantic love plot.

What have the critics said about the play?

Many critics have remarked that the play asks more questions than it answers, and in so doing, it allows us to continue asking them ourselves, questions like how human beings learn to conform to gender roles, how we use each other in forging identity, how storytelling affects us, and whether there is such a thing as a perfectly happy, unforced ending.

Unique Features of Our Production

- Set in the turbulent decade of the 1960s, our production seeks to capture a nostalgic version of that time, when radical ideas about love, gender, war, and music were all around, and young people felt like they could defy authority and tradition, and break out of their received roles to experience a more authentic version of themselves, which may or may not have lasted into adulthood.
- Instead of a King of France, our production features a Queen, giving Bertram yet one more female authority figure to resist, and giving Helena yet one more female supporter for her cause. Other than the gender pronouns, we have not changed the King's language or his role beyond the usual cuts we make in the script for every character to allow our production to fit into the time constraints of our stage.

Things to Look for in the Play

- The Fool (Lavatch). He appears throughout the play, and when he does, he speaks with poignant wisdom. His critique on the characters and his social views are rather revolutionary for his time, but because he is the fool, the jokester and the entertainment, the other characters do not see his words as true or serious. Are they? Often the fool in Shakespeare's plays serves this function, a mouthpiece for critique that does not risk censure because, after all, he is just a fool.
- Parolles. He presents himself as overly masculine and showy, and attempts to make others look up to him as wealthy and powerful. Bertram looks up to him in the beginning of the play, but eventually Parolles is exposed as a sham. Does this renouncing of Parolles allow Bertram to see the fragile nature of masculinity as a performance? And how are we to feel about Parolles when, after being thoroughly disgraced by those he thought were his friends, he stands alone on stage and tells us with remarkable optimism: "Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live...Being fooled, by fool'ry thrive. / There's place and means for every man alive. / I'll after them" (4.3, 354-362).
- Clothing. Parolles defines himself by his clothes. When he is prosperous and accepted, his clothing is extravagant and showy. When he finds disfavor, his clothes are shabby and beggarly. It is interesting too that a character's attitude can depend on his or her clothes. Parolles is arrogant and self-assured with wealthy clothes, but humble and lost when he is in rags. This putting on clothes to

move between social classes is noticeable throughout Shakespeare's plays and always draws our attention to the fact that actors wear different outfits, many of which belong to a higher social class. It also reminds us that during Shakespeare's time clothing was very important, so much so that it was a crime to wear the clothes of the nobility if one was not of that class...unless you were an actor.

What scenes should we especially look for?

- One key pair of scenes, located in Act 4, both involve trickery and deception, the first happens offstage, the second right in front of us. The first is when Diana and Helena trick Bertram. He believes he is going to have sex with Diana, but he is tricked into sleeping with Helena instead. This trick to obtain intimacy also serves to officially trap Bertram in his marriage. At about the same time, we have the tricking of Parolles, when his own friends and comrades conspire to make him show his cowardice and betray them. He thinks he has been caught by foreign soldiers, and he spills his guts in order to save his life. It is interesting to compare both the intentions and the outcome of these two deceptions, both in some ways well deserved, but it's also worth remembering that in Shakespeare's England, theatre itself was accused of being a huge deception, and actors were often suspect.
- Another important issue to notice in scenes throughout the play is how often Helena has to overcome a powerful person's resistance or doubt in order to fulfill her quest and win her chance to be with the man she loves. Over and over, she encounters resistance, overcomes obstacles, and defeats those who stand in her way. And all of the play's characters, whether old or young, male or female, friend or foe, seem to admire Helena and eventually grant her whatever she requests. Yet, at every turn Bertram resists her charms, and even seems to regard her as repulsive. If we notice the pattern that all the other characters view Helena favorably, we might ask whether Bertram is put off not by Helena's lack of some good quality, but rather that she might be too good in some way for him. And why would that make him resist her? Is it possible that his masculinity is threatened by the strength of Helena's life force?

Notes on "*All's Well That Ends Well: A Modern Perspective*" an essay in the Folger edition of the play.

One key way to understand this article is to understand that McCandless approaches the play with a focus on the dynamics of gender. McCandless says:

Traditional criticism has thus tended to portray [Helena] as either a long-suffering saint or a cunning vixen—either glossing over her audacious desire and celebrating her virtue, or reading her virtue as a mask for audacity and regretting or deploring her duplicity. (236)

McCandless does not focus on Helena as one or the other, but rather celebrates that she is both the virtuous woman, and also the cunning woman able to overcome obstacles to achieve her goal. McCandless sees both Bertram and Helena as victims of a rigid society that cannot accept anything other than stereotypical males exhibiting the prescribed order of masculinity or females who fit the standards for femininity: silent and submissive. McCandless starts by saying that males judge their masculinity based on how other males view them. This helps us to understand Bertram's obsession with Parolles, and also helps us understand why he runs away from home to fight in a war that really has no significance to him. (Notice that the play is not at all concerned with the war itself, as the men are allowed to fight "on either side.") Helena, on the other hand, does not consciously reject the feminine ideal of being pursued by a male and submitting to him in all things. However, she is forced to take matters into her own hands and pursue the man she wants in order to make it possible for her to be a wife. While McCandless sees both Bertram and Helena as trapped in traditional gender roles that they are not comfortable with, the more striking character in the play is Helena. She not only defies gender stereotypes, she also ultimately saves Bertram from a destructive path and makes the play able to end with a comic gesture. Thus, one can view her as a revolutionary figure who successfully challenges the social idea of gender, and stands out as one of Shakespeare's most remarkable female characters.

McCandless, David. "All's Well That Ends Well: A Modern Perspective." *All's Well That Ends Well*. Ed. Barbara A. Mowat & Paul Werstine. New York: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 2001. 235- 251. Print

Understanding Helena





In *All's Well That Ends Well* we have a unique feature of a female protagonist, something not common in Shakespeare's plays. Indeed, the entire play is conceivably the story of Helena. We start with her goal of marrying Bertram and being his wife. She is not daunted by their difference in social standing and is even willing to risk death to secure her marriage. Then, even when she fulfills the impossible task of curing the King's disease, Bertram says that he "cannot love her, nor will strive to do't," and we see that her goal of winning his love is not destined to be. One cannot force love. However, Helena, as indicated by her discussion with Parolles about virginity, makes it clear that she, like the men of the time, believes she should be able to choose her own partner and thus she does not give up when she faces opposition from Bertram. She eventually gains his love, impossibly overcoming all obstacles, yet we may be left with the sense that she has also become somewhat disillusioned about romantic love itself. When she says at the end, " 'Tis but the shadow of a wife you see, / The name and not the thing" (5.3.350-351), it is possible that she may not believe herself to be the wife of Bertram, just the shadow, because she does not believe in the concept of a wife as a completely new identity anymore. Perhaps she now knows that she cannot be the perfect submissive wife to Bertram, nor can she feel the same innocent, youthful devotion she felt before the strain of the obstacles she has faced throughout the play. Bertram professes his intention to love her "ever, ever dearly," but we can be forgiven if we do not easily believe him. Thus, we leave the play not sure that all is well. And when the King turns to Diana, offering her the choice of a husband, we may feel as if the same dilemma is set up to repeat again, perhaps in an infinite loop, the struggle to find an individual identity and an authentic relationship among the masks of gender and status we are required to wear in our social interactions.

ACTIVITIES FOR BEFORE YOU SEE THE PLAY:

1. Research on the rise of the counterculture in the 1960s [Individual or Group Research for Powerpoint Presentation]. As a context for this production of *All's Well* it might be helpful to know a little bit about the setting of the 1960s, including issues such as: women's liberation; the generation gap; the rise of rock & roll music (and the lifestyle that accompanied it); the Vietnam War and the protests against it; the questioning of authority that went along with those protests; agitation for civil rights; and many other political and social topics that might occur to you in reading about the turbulent decade of the 1960s. Along with understanding historical events and what the culture was like during this time period, it might also be helpful to look into how people of the counterculture spoke among each other and how they wished to present themselves to others. By researching this period thoroughly, it will lead to a better understanding of how a character like Helena's views on love and her quest to obtain it fit into this historical background.
2. Group discussions on love and lust [Large or Small Group Discussion, and Writing Topic]. A discussion of the difference(s) between love and lust will help understand some of the major issues at stake in the play. Shakespeare was very interested in exploring the mystery of love, and this play is no exception. In the play, we see that Helena loves Bertram to the point that she will pursue his love no matter the obstacle. Bertram, on the other hand, will pursue Diana only until he thinks he has caught her, and then he wants nothing to do with her.
3. Group discussions on the topic of female purity and society's double standard for men and women [Large or Small Group Discussion, and Writing Topic]. With older students in particular, this topic might be interesting to discuss before seeing the play. In the play, Helena and Parolles have a witty conversation about "virginity," exposing the social norm of females being the pursued while the males are the pursuers. In this context, sexuality can be seen as a proving ground for young men, but a minefield for young women. In the play, women like Diana and Helena seem to risk a lot by allowing themselves to fall in love, but a man like Bertram thinks he can seduce anyone he wants and not be punished for it. Does our society today still have such a double standard? How do we know? [After seeing the play, it might be interesting to revisit this topic and ask whether anything in the play allows us to argue for or against such a double standard in our society? In this play, Shakespeare seems to question the double standard, letting the women choose the men, making it the woman who goes on a quest and works miracles. What are the implications if we see that Shakespeare was asking these questions 400 years ago?]
4. Group line reading [Large or Small Group Activity]: Below is a list of resonant lines from different parts of the play. By having a small group in charge of one of the following lines, they can first read the line to each other, noticing the tone and the emotional content behind the words. Then each

group can read their line to the larger group, thus giving everyone a chance to hear all the lines. Then a large class discussion can ensue, commenting on what kind of emotions we hear in these lines? Based on who is speaking, does this suggest anything about the character speaking? Based on the point in the play, does any character's emotional tone change from one act or scene to another? What do you notice about the voices in the play? *This activity could also be done by having individual students responsible for a character and reading that character's line or lines. Then the group can discuss the above questions. Line-tossing, where each person memorizes a line and says it while tossing a ball around a circle, is also a good way to play with the words of the play and get the voices into our ears.

Resonant Lines:

Do wrong to none. Love all, trust a few,

[Countess – 1.1.66-7]

Virginity, like an old courtier, wears her cap out of fashion...

[Parolles – 1.1.161-3]

'Twere all one
That I should love a bright particular star
And think to wed it, he is so above me.

[Helena – 1.1, 90-92]

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie
Which we ascribe to heaven.

[Helena – 1.1.222-3]

Religious in mine error, I adore
The sun that looks upon his worshipper
But knows of him no more.

[Helena – 1.3.215-17]

I have spoke
With one that in her sex, her years, profession,

Wisdom, and constancy hath amazed me more
Than I dare blame my weakness.

[Lafew – 2.1.95-8]

A poor physician's daughter my wife? Disdain
Rather corrupt me forever!

[Bertram – 2.3.126-27]

Good alone
Is good, without a name.

[King – 2.3.139-40]

Strangers and foes do sunder and not kiss.

[Helena – 2.5.96]

Beware of them, Diana. Their promises,
Enticements, oaths, tokens, and all these
Engines of lust are not the things they go under.

[Mariana – 3.5.19-21]

Alas, poor lady,
'Tis hard bondage to become the wife
Of a detesting lord.

[Diana – 3.5.72-4]

The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good
and ill together.

[First Lord Dumaine – 4.3.73-74]

Simply the thing I am

Shall make me live.

[Parolles – 4.3, 355-56]

Being fooled, by fool'ry thrive.
There's place and means for every man alive.

[Parolles – 4.3 360-61]

All's well that ends well. Still the fine's the crown.
Whate'er the course, the end is renown.

[Helena – 4.4.39-40]

'Tis but the shadow of a wife you see,
The name and not the thing.

[Helena – 5.3.350-51]

All yet seems well, and if it end so meet,
The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet.

[King – 5.3.378-79]

ACTIVITIES FOR AFTER YOU SEE THE PLAY:

1. A good post-production discussion can develop from such questions as:
 - Who were your favorite characters? Why?
 - What were your favorite scenes? Why?
 - Did the 1960s setting seem to work with the play? Why?
 - What did not work well for you in the play? Why?
 - Favorite costume?
 - Favorite piece of music?
 - What made you laugh?
 - Do you feel like All's Well in the end? Why?
2. Another good source of discussion involves gender stereotypes and how Bertram and Helena both defy these stereotypes. [*Reference David McCandless's article, "*All's Well That Ends Well: A Modern Perspective*" in the Folger edition of the play; see notes on this article above]:

- Was Bertram right in refusing to marry Helena if he actually did not love her?
 - How would we feel about it if the genders were reversed, and the man was trying to win the woman's hand?
 - Was it okay for Helena to trick Bertram in the bed-trick scene?
 - How do we feel about Diana and her role in the bed-trick?
 - Is "sisterhood" (the bonds between women that help them overcome some of the disadvantages of being female in a patriarchal society) an important force in this play? How does it work?
 - Was the marriage at the end actually a good thing?
3. Prediction: Will the marriage of Bertram and Helena be happy after the play is over? Do you think Helena is still in love with Bertram at the end?
 4. Another discussion might focus on class differences: Is it still difficult today for people to find friendship or love across social classes? Across different high school groups?
 5. Parolles gives us the topic of clothes. Does what one wears still define his or her social class? How? Should we read so much into a person's clothing? Why/why not?
 6. Prediction: What do you think will happen to Parolles after the play is over? Do you feel like he is treated fairly in the play?

Useful websites to consult about teaching Shakespeare and *All's Well That Ends Well*:

www.folger.edu

www.shmoop.com