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Helena and “the Rarest Argument of Wonder”: *All’s Well That Ends Well* and the Romance Genre

Byron Nelson, *West Virginia University*

In recent years, *All’s Well That Ends Well* has enjoyed fresh consideration, on both page and stage. It has come to seem less a “problem play” than an early romance; Helena has come to seem better fitted to the company of Marina and Perdita than to Isabella; and some critics have detected the presence of a collaborator, possibly Thomas Middleton. In particular, readers of the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) in 2012 can hardly have missed the debate about the date of, and possible collaboration in, *All’s Well That Ends Well*. There, Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith suggest a later date for the play, a possible collaborator for Shakespeare, and a new generic identity for *All’s Well*. In posing their revisionist theory, Maguire and Smith contemplate the unusual variety of problems in *All’s Well* as compared to the plays that were first printed in the 1623 Folio. They observe that MacDonald Jackson’s dating of the play after 1606, which was tacitly accepted by Lois Potter in her new biography of Shakespeare, is beginning to accrue wide acceptance. Separated from its longtime companions, *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, and released from the now-disputed genre of “problem play,” *All’s Well* seems very different when viewed in the company of the late romances. Maguire and Smith note that, if the new, later date is correct, the play no longer seems “a misfit problem play but an early ‘late romance’” (13). The thematic motifs consistent with the late romances suddenly seem apparent: the plot of *All’s Well* begins where *Pericles* ends, with a long-suffering maiden healing a sick monarch; it ends where *The Winter’s Tale* begins, with a pregnant wife. Like Hermione in the latter play, Helena returns miraculously, from her supposed death, although in *All’s Well* the audience is made privy to the secret of the heroine’s long disappearance from the action—and not deceived about her supposed death, as is the audience of *The Winter’s Tale*. The conclusions of both plays are notable for the restoration of wronged and suffering wives, and both plays deploy the language of grace and wonder. The apparently supernatural awakening of the statue of Hermione is anticipated by the scene in which Helena cures the apparently incurable King of France of his ambiguous, life-threatening

malady—and, I would add, the scenes of the magical cures of Thaisa by the healer Cerimon and of the speechless and morose Pericles by his as-yet unrecognized daughter Marina.

More controversially, Maguire and Smith propose the hand of a previously undetected collaborator in the composition of *All's Well*. “[A] second hand—that of Thomas Middleton—might be detected in this play,” they argue with some degree of persuasiveness (“Many Hands” 13). They cite the high proportion of rhyming lines, the unusual vocabulary (e.g., words like *ruttish* and *fistula*), contractions and colloquialisms not usually associated with Shakespeare, and a fondness for mock-languages, such as the hybrid language devised by the soldiers for the exposure of Parolles (13-14). Perhaps inspired by the recent identification of George Wilkins as the probable collaborator in *Pericles* and Middleton’s apparently prodigious gift for collaboration revealed by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino in their massive *Collected Works* of Thomas Middleton, Maguire and Smith accept the new consensus that collaboration was part of Shakespeare’s professional practice; they insist, “stylistically it is striking how many of the widely acknowledged problems of *All's Well* can be understood differently when we postulate dual authorship” (15).

Within a month, Maguire and Smith’s argument in *TLS* drew a ferocious rejoinder from Brian Vickers and Marcus Dahl, who insisted, “there is absolutely no evidence of another hand in this play” (15). They accused Maguire and Smith of ignoring the scholarship and distorting the evidence; for the unusual linguistic features of *All's Well* as it appears in the First Folio, Vickers and Dahl blamed failures in the text’s transcription. Undeterred by this onslaught, Maguire and Smith, in the best partisan spirit of an election campaign, accused their assailants of following unreliable methodology and clinging to sentimental Victorian assumptions; in addition, they admonished Vickers and Dahl for failing to spot the evidence for revisions and collaborations in *Measure for Measure* and *Macbeth* and ignoring the evidence for the new, later date—1607, rather than the traditional early 1600s (“*All's Well*” 6). At this point, either passions cooled or the editors of the *TLS* letters page grew weary of the battle, and the rejoinders ceased.

Whatever the merits of these conflicting arguments, I was struck by the way in which *All's Well That Ends Well* suddenly seems a fresher and more powerful play when viewed as an early “late romance” and not

confined to the ghetto of “problem plays.” As Gordon McMullan explains, by “this simple, if undefended, chronological change, the romance elements in the *All’s Well* plot take on entirely new significance” (10). The possible re-dating of *All’s Well* opens up the possibility that Shakespeare’s interest in the romance genre did not begin with a chance encounter with the draft and sketches for Wilkins’s *Pericles*, which in the classic theory of Philip Edwards marked a startling new phase in Shakespeare’s career: “It would be curious indeed if Shakespeare had discovered, in a poor play that he started tinkering with, the kind of plot, the kind of art, the kind of theme, which he was to spend all the endeavour of the last years of his writing life trying to develop” (qtd. in Warren 7). What if, instead, *All’s Well* rather than *Pericles* marks the beginning of Shakespeare’s final phase? Seen this way, Helena seems to have more in common with the plucky, put-upon heroines of the romances, like Marina and Imogen, than she does with the otherworldly Isabella.

Marianne Elliott, in her production of *All’s Well That Ends Well* for the Royal National Theatre in London in 2009, chose to stress the fantastic elements rather than to brood on the scholarly problems cited above. Elliott apparently sought to present the play in a manner that was fresh and accessible to a contemporary audience; I doubt that she had any thought of pleasing literary scholars. But reconsidering her production in light of the *TLS* debate illustrates nicely the new insights that can come from seeing *All’s Well* as a late romance. Helena, played by Michelle Terry, was brisk, determined, and bawdy; she was far from demure or hesitant in devising the bed trick, for which she enjoyed the enthusiastic partnership of Diana; and, dressed like Little Red Riding Hood, she went off on her pilgrimage up a steep hill at the rear of the stage and into a spooky Gothic forest suggestive of both early illustrations for the Brothers Grimm and Tim Burton’s movies. There was no hint of a Victorian maiden’s modesty when she cured the King of France of his life-threatening fistula. The production made no attempt to explain Helena’s idolatrous obsession with the callow Bertram, who in this production was never more than a foolish boy who fantasizes about military heroism; as such, he was easy prey for the absurd boasts of Parolles, who was dressed as an Elvis impersonator, decked out with garish scarves. (Parolles’s costume in this production amusingly fulfilled Lafew’s description of him as “a snipped-taffeta fellow” [4.5.1-2].¹) Helena was happy to share the

company of the festive girls of Florence, who were dressed in a manner reminiscent of the girls in the dance at the gym in the film version of *West Side Story*. Only the wedding photos, taken after Helena's recovery of Bertram, in which the faces grew progressively gloomier in a set of freeze-frames, seemed to predict the disillusionment of the newlyweds. The production did not specifically evoke the tone of wonder we associate with the late romances—the sets were occasionally evocative of the fantastic illustrations of Dr. Seuss—but it certainly affirmed Helena's healthy sexuality and distinguished her from the cool repression of Isabella. Indeed, this Helena had more in common with the scheming city wives of Middleton and looked back to the upbeat, pragmatic heroines of Shakespeare's early comedies, from Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Rosalind in *As You Like It*, rather than to the long-suffering Isabella.

Like Thaisa, Hermione, and other heroines of the romances, Helena disappears from the action for a long stretch and is widely thought by the other characters to have died, and her return in Act 5 is treated as a miraculous resurrection. Since the audience is privy to her planned disappearance, the effect of her return is not as shocking as Hermione's in *The Winter's Tale*. Most significantly, in a manner that anticipates the late romances, Helena is depicted as a medical and psychological healer; as such, she looks backward to Friar Laurence as an herbal physician and forward to Cerimon and Marina in *Pericles*. The herbal cures of the friar and Helena demonstrate that Shakespeare's interest in herbal cures preceded his acquaintance with future son-in-law Dr. John Hall; perhaps, instead, his interest in holistic medicine prepared the way for his apparently friendly relationship with Susanna's husband, the respected Puritan physician of Hall's Croft in Stratford-upon-Avon. Helena's cure of the King of France from his life-threatening fistula is a highly complex affair, and it deserves better than Lois Potter's flippant dismissal, in her new biography of the playwright: "Helena, though Bernard Shaw called her a 'lady doctor,' does not really have more medical skills than those every woman of the period was supposed to have, plus a prescription that her father has left among his papers" (336). To say this is to miss the profoundly spiritual and psychological effects of her treatment; and if indeed "every woman of the period" had the same medical skills, why did none of them possess the expertise to cure the

ailing monarch? "Every woman" didn't cure the King of France; only Helena, heir to her father's considerable medical knowledge, provided the cure.

Although Shakespeare for good reason chooses not to stage the scene of the king's recovery, Helena's therapeutic skills are considerable, and the audience is encouraged to believe her claim to be able to cure the king. Her father, Gerard de Narbon, left her "prescriptions / Of rare and proved effects" (1.3.219-20); the fact that he did so on his deathbed (2.1.106-7) gives this knowledge the extra cachet of a solemn parental blessing. Lafew testifies to the astounding effect of Helena's treatment when he tells the ailing king that he had seen a medicine that could "breathe life into a stone" and "[q]uicken a rock" (2.1.74-75). Even Parolles, not normally given to praising anyone but himself, proclaims Helena's cure as "the rarest argument of wonder that hath shot out in our latter times" (2.3.7-8). Helena approaches her opportunity to cure the king with the same confidence with which she chooses Bertram as her marriage partner. Unlike the boastful Parolles, she announces her intention to provide a cure with crisp professional confidence rather than with boastful self-promotion: "There is a remedy . . . / To cure [the King's] desperate languishings" (1.3.226-27), she announces, and she furthermore coolly predicts that she can cure the king in twenty-four hours (2.1.167).

Shakespeare chooses not to depict Helena at work as a medical practitioner, but it is clear that everyone in the play, except the jejune Bertram, is impressed by Helena's dignity and perseverance. Lafew admits to being amazed by her professional manner, wisdom, and constancy (2.1.84-85), while Helena herself modestly insists that "remedies oft in ourselves do lie," although they are popularly attributed to heaven (1.1.216-17). Helen Wilcox calls *All's Well* "Shakespeare's 'miracle play,'" not because of any indebtedness to the medieval dramatic genre but because "devotion, faith and redemption are among its chief concerns" (140). In attempting to cure the king, Helena insists that the test is on heaven, not on her, and she describes her proposed treatment in specifically theological terms as "great'st grace lending grace" (2.1.162). She even hints briefly at an astrological influence at work in her cure when she notes, "his good receipt / Shall for my legacy be sanctified / By th' luckiest stars in heaven" (1.3.242-44). Wilcox is on solid footing to

claim that Helena's major actions in the play—the cure, her pilgrimage to a holy shrine, her apparent return from the dead, and her pregnancy—confirm her identity as an agent of divine grace. As Wilcox insists, “The source of her confidence is divine aid or ‘greatest Grace lending grace’ [sic], for which she claims simply to function as a conduit” (141).

At the same time, however, it must be admitted that her pregnancy—indeed, what Wilcox calls “the mysterious pregnancy of a supposedly virgin mother” (140)—is actually not the result of any divine miracle but a skillfully-planned and well-executed bed trick which nearly results in a ruined reputation and imprisonment for Helena's paid accomplice, Diana. Bertram is, of course, Helena's newly-married husband, and he imagines in the pitch darkness that he is accomplishing his lustful goal of seducing Diana. It is statistically a long shot for Helena to become pregnant at her very first sexual encounter, but we have to remember that, unlike Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, she is already something of a sexual adventurer, in word if not in physical act. She has already parried wittily with Parolles about her virginity, and she admits early in the play that her affection for Bertram is irrational and close to idolatry—“Indian-like” (1.3.201).

The play chooses not to stage two crucial scenes that no Hollywood producer today with an eye on the box-office receipts would omit from a screen version: the cure of the king and the bed trick. Elliott's 2009 Royal National Theatre production happily enacted the bed trick in shadows behind a backlit sheet, with Diana, already in bed with Bertram, skillfully handing off the baton, so to speak, to Helena, who enthusiastically jumps into the bed to replace her. And whatever the exact nature of the king's malady may be, it is hard for the reader not to conceive of the cure as at least partly, or largely, the result of a sexual encounter. While we are never told exactly where the king's “fistula” is located, the malady is usually associated with the rectum or the groin. In explaining the benefits of Helena's proposed cure to the ailing monarch, Lafew tells the king that her cure could “make you dance canary” and could “araise King Pepin” and “give great Charlemain a pen in's hand,” and both phrases strongly suggest the reawakening of sexual potency (2.1.75-78), as do the earlier lines about enlivening stones and rocks. When he emerges from his encounter with Helena, Lafew describes the king with the striking and unexpected German or Dutch adjective *lustig* (2.3.41); and, describing a

dance that is even more pointedly sexual than the canary, Lafew says that the king is now "able to lead her a coranto" (2.3.43). Certainly by the mid-seventeenth century, the coranto had earned a reputation as a provocative sexual dance; the Ranters and other radical religious sects of the English Revolution were often accused of conducting mixed naked dances, as in the "Ranters' coranto" or the "Adamite Curranto." (For example, Gilbert Roulston, one of the numerous anti-Ranter pamphleteers from the years 1650-51 salaciously reported that the Ranters "stript themselves quite naked, and dans[ed] the *Adamites Curranto*" [2].) This is not to insist necessarily that Helena has actually provided sexual services to the king, only that there seems to have been clear erotic or sexual content to Helena's therapy, and that Lafew's provocative language invites us at least to imagine such content. It is even tempting to imagine that Helena at the play's end is carrying not Bertram's child but the king's. (Admittedly, this possibility drives the fairy tale aspect of the romance genre into the brick wall of hard reality; and if this theory of the king's paternity is correct, Helena would join the company of such brisk pragmatists in the romances as the brothel managers in *Pericles* and Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*.)

If Shakespeare's depiction of the king's cure hints broadly at bawdy behavior, it fits in deftly with the other cunning aspects of Helena's character. She has, after all, chosen Bertram for a marriage partner clearly against his will; she misrepresents the nature of her supposedly religious pilgrimage, going to Florence rather than St. Jacques le Grand; she devises the bed trick and pays Diana for her bawdy role in it; and she recruits the Widow of Florence and Diana in her feminine conspiracy. The bed trick has its origin in the narrative of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, where Tamar, posing as a prostitute, has sex with her father-in-law, Judah, who fails to recognize her identity, in order to convey the seed of Judah. The deception of the bed trick neatly parallels the climax of the play's subplot, the exposure of the mendacity of the boastful Parolles; the disguised Helena seduces Bertram, who is besotted with lust for Diana and agrees to meet his imagined beloved in the dark, just as Parolles, while captured and blindfolded, eagerly betrays the military secrets of the army. Blinded by lust or the determination to remain alive, at whatever cost to honor, Bertram and Parolles commit actions that bring them into discredit, although Parolles is publicly humiliated, while

Bertram is forgiven and rewarded at play's end. At least the cowardly Parolles admits to the pragmatism that underlies his shabby betrayal—"Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live" (4.3.335-36)—while Bertram is as churlish as ever when confronted with the evidence that Helena has indeed fulfilled the conditions of his impossible bargain.

Helena's cure of the king bears comparison with the twin scenes of healing in *Pericles* and anticipates a persistent theme in the late romances. Cerimon, who revives Thaisa from her apparent death and rude burial at sea, is depicted as an exemplary healer who piously invokes the Greek physician-god Aesculapius for guidance (3.2.114). Unlike Helena, he claims no divine mandate for his cures, and in his expository speeches he reveals information that his followers undoubtedly already know: that he prefers virtue and cunning over status (nobleness) and riches (28-30) and that he has had medical training. He has studied medicine ("Tis known I ever / Have studied physic" [33-34]) and is acquainted with "blest infusions" (37). When he recognizes that Thaisa shows signs of life, he promptly calls for fire and medical supplies—which in his holistic program include cloths, music, and air (81-83, 89, 90, 93). But he's no miracle-worker, and early in the scene he admits to a servant that he was unable to save the life of his master (7-9). He understands that Thaisa's recovery is tentative and warns his assistants to be cautious, but his exhortation to Thaisa—"Live, and make / Us weep to hear your fate, fair creature, / Rare as you seem to be" (104-6)—has a miraculous ring to it, as if Cerimon were calling her back into life. When in the play's final scene he presents the long-lost Thaisa to the incredulous Pericles, he sounds like both a consoling physician and an archeologist who has found a treasure: "Look, Thaisa is / Recovered" (5.3.27-28).

Marina's therapy, when she cures her speechless father on the ship in the harbor at Mytilene, is more a matter of music therapy than hard medical treatment—unlike Helena, she has no prescriptions inherited from a medical father—but she achieves immediate results. Pericles is first roused out of his silence by Marina's song, then by his gradual realization of Marina's true identity. Sadly, no original song by Shakespeare has survived, and none is included in the 1609 quarto text, and while the song included in Lawrence Twine's *Pattern of Painful Adventures* is hardly distinguished poetry, it does include some crucial details which eventually help Pericles to confirm Marina's identity:

“Amongst the harlots foul I walk / Yet harlot none am I” (qtd. in Warren 290). From Marina’s opening words, it is conceivably (but only remotely) possible to excuse Pericles for striking Marina, if he is convinced that she is merely a hardened prostitute who has come to solicit his patronage. Yet only a thug or deranged person would respond violently to the simplicity and sincerity of Marina’s singing. We should perhaps recall that Marina endured an unhappy childhood at the court of Cleon and Dionyza and that she had inadvertently inspired Dionyza’s insane hatred simply by outshining their daughter Philoten. Yet she did learn a valuable set of skills appropriate to a gentle woman at the Renaissance court, such as sewing, singing, weaving, and dancing (4.6.184); these are the skills that Marina proposes to teach at the academy for young women that she will open, with Bolt’s assistance, from the money paid to her by Lysimachus. She also proposes to teach “other virtues, which I’ll keep from boast” (4.6.185), as she explains it discretely to Bolt. It’s hard not to imagine these as courtesans’ tricks that she has observed during her stay in the Mytilene brothel; moreover, sewing, singing, and dancing are among the skills that a skillful Renaissance courtesan like Veronica Franco in Venice would keep in her repertory of professional activities. (As Margaret F. Rosenthal notes in her reconstruction of the career of Franco, the courtesan’s complex repertory of services was by no means “limited to sexual activity” [4].) Unlike Helena, Marina seemingly remains a virgin to the end of her play; but no heroine of a Shakespearean romance has endured more threats of violence and threats of sexual assault. Given her bitter life experiences, it seems scarcely plausible to describe Marina as “innocent” by the time she exits the play as promised wife of Lysimachus, the corrupt prince and harbor official and cynical sex addict.

In short, Shakespeare’s interest in affirming the power of magical and medical cures in *All’s Well* precedes the official canon of the “late romances,” and Helena’s pluck and initiative make her comparable more to the heroines of the romances, especially Marina, than to the abstemious Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, with whom she is frequently paired. The proposed later date for *All’s Well* suggests that this play, rather than *Pericles*, begins the period of the romances, on which Shakespeare spends most of his artistic energy in the latest phase of his writing career. Helena’s career looks forward to Marina’s, in the sense that both overcome impossible odds, have problematic relationships with

fathers who have either died or disappeared, are confronted with highly unusual sexual demands, and (most intriguingly) are possessed of unusual medical skills and therapeutic techniques. Dismayingly, both find themselves in marriages to unsuitable partners. Bertram is hostile to or ungrateful for the benefits of the match that Helena has dreamt about idolatrously from the beginning, and Lysimachus is a corrupt prince cynically taking kickbacks as the harbor inspector whose response to his first sight of Marina is appallingly sexist: “Faith, she would serve after a long voyage at sea” (4.6.43-44). One is tempted to say of these marriages, as Jaques sneeringly taunts Touchstone, “thy loving voyage / Is but for two months victualed” (*AYL* 5.4.190-91).

Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith may well be correct in detecting the collaboration of Thomas Middleton in the composition of *All's Well*, and we may well attribute the play's sexual cynicism to the author of plays like *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, just as one might credit or blame George Wilkins, the brothel-keeper and cynical playwright, for the seamier sexual details in *Pericles* that (as the Victorians would say) our “gentle” Shakespeare would surely never countenance. Helena's taste for sexual intrigue and her determination to become pregnant by the man she desires may well have been suggested to Shakespeare by the opportunism of Middleton's bawdy heroines. The innocent, credulous belief of both Helena and Marina that their medical cures are guided by heaven seems purely Shakespearean, and this faith in heavenly intervention is scarcely like a Middletonian solution. The evidence for Middleton's involvement is simply not strong enough at this point to credit him as a collaborator. Yet there are enough hints (like the use of the unusual word *fistula* and Helena's shocking sexual pragmatism) to suggest that Shakespeare felt Middleton's influence on some level.

Helena's pregnancy, against all odds, like the preservation of Marina's virginity despite horrendous threats, is the miracle that introduces the world of the late romances. It prepares the stage for the triumphant restoration of the reputation of Imogen, the recovery of the lost Perdita, and the miraculous preservation or literal resurrection of Hermione. As the earliest of Shakespeare's romances, *All's Well That Ends Well* is itself “the rarest argument of wonder.”

Notes

1. All quotations from Shakespearean text refer to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 6th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2009).

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