

All's Well That Ends Well

INTRODUCTION

All's Well That Ends Well, first printed in the 1623 Folio, is often paired with *Measure for Measure*. Though we lack external evidence as to its date of composition, internal evidence suggests that it, too, is an early Jacobean play. Like *Measure for Measure*, it places its central characters in more painful situations than those in which the heroes and heroines of the earlier, more romantic comedies usually find themselves. The touching ardour with which Helen, 'a poor physician's daughter', pursues the young Bertram, son of her guardian the Countess of Rousillon, creates embarrassments for both of them. When the King whose illness she cures by her semi-magical skills brings about their marriage as a reward, Bertram's flight to the wars seems to destroy all her chances of happiness. She achieves consummation of the marriage only by the ruse (resembling Isabella's 'bed-trick' in *Measure for Measure*) of substituting herself for the Florentine maiden Diana whom Bertram believes himself to be seducing. The play's conclusion, in which the deception is exposed and Bertram is shamed into acknowledging Helen as his wife, offers only a tentatively happy ending.

Shakespeare based the story of Bertram and Helen on a tale from Boccaccio's *Decameron* either in the original or in the version included in William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1566±7, revised 1575). But he created several important characters, including the Countess and the old Lord, Lafeu. He also invented the accompanying action exposing the roguery of Bertram's flashy friend Paroles, a man of words (as his name indicates) descending from the braggart soldier of Roman comedy.

Versions of the play performed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mostly emphasizing either the comedy of Paroles or the sentimental appeal of Helen, had little success; but some twentieth-century productions have shown it in a more favourable light, demonstrating, for example, that the role of the Countess is (in Bernard Shaw's words) 'the most beautiful old woman's part ever written', that the discomfiture of Paroles provides comedy that is subtle as well as highly laughable, and

that the relationship of Bertram and Helen is profoundly convincing in its emotional reality.