

2017 SAA Seminar: *All's Well That Ends Well*: New Approaches Abstracts
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All's Not Well at the Private Theaters

One of the biggest problems in the very problematic play that is *All's Well* is the character of Bertram. While critical opinion toward him has softened somewhat in recent years—Jonathan Bate, for example, rightly observes that “If a woman were forced to marry in [that] way, we would rather admire her for withholding sexual favors from her husband” than dislike her—scholars still tend to view Bertram as, at best, callow and insensitive, at worst a total cad, and either way an unworthy love object for Helena. My essay will contextualize Bertram within the theatrical politics of the early seventeenth century to suggest that the character’s unlikableness was, in part, intended as a criticism of the values espoused by the private theaters. Recent work on the early modern theatrical companies and their repertoires has suggested that the King’s Men charted a middle ground between the drama of the public and private theaters, attempting to attract a gentlemanly audience while pulling back from fully embracing the values of the private theaters. Private theater drama, highly influenced by its proximity to the Inns of Court, tended to be ironic, classist, skeptical of normative morality, and misogynistic, particularly glorifying male sexual conquest. In contrast to and as a rejection of this set of values, public theater drama tended to valorize female chastity, marriage, and genuine emotional connection. My essay argues that while in some ways *All's Well* does play to private theater values, that Bertram also embodies the worst values of the private theaters and Inns in his social snobbery, friendship with Parolles and absorption of his code, and rejection of Helena and “tryst” with Diana. The audience’s distaste for him, and Helena’s “defeat” of Bertram, thus stands as Shakespeare’s rejection of private theater values and support for public, even as he played to a gentlemanly audience by staging Bertram at all.

Julie Crawford, Columbia University

Making Marriage in All's Well That Ends Well

Marriage is the problem in the problem comedy *All's Well That Ends Well*. It is unfavourably contrasted with the other forms of ritual kinship that the play actively celebrates, particularly sworn brotherhood and adoption, and some of its most baldly economic movers, including dowries and wardships, are subject to sustained and sharp-eyed analysis. The work of the play, then, is less to effect a happy marriage than to expose its radical disparities and explore some ways of mitigating them. Laurie Shannon has argued that the work of comedy in a homonormative society – one that idealizes and normalizes same-sex bonds – is to make marriage thinkable in terms of parity. Yet marriage in *All's Well That Ends Well* is never really thinkable in such terms, save in the fantasies of critics betrothed to the idea that comedies (must) end in (happy) marriages. (Reading aggressively against surface, one critic asks why we should not expect that Helen and Bertram will be happy?). Marriage in *All's Well That Ends Well* is not effected as a painstaking supersession of same-sex bonds; rather, it is effected through

those same sex bonds: both those between Helen and the Countess, and, in the second half of the play, between Helen and the virgin Diana.

Brett Gamboa, Dartmouth College

“Guilty and not guilty’: Bertram, Helena, and Shakespearean Stereopsis

Throughout the career, Shakespeare’s plays often generate dramatic energy by setting the audience’s generic or moral sympathies at odds with its theatrical interests. Such it is that Richmond or Malcolm seems disappointing by design; that *Merchant’s* comic ending can feel indecorous considering the tragedy it displaces; that Vincentio, or Prospero, can appear as the chief instigators of problems that they, as protagonists, work to set right. In *All’s Well*, though, Shakespeare seems to do something different, perhaps unique, by allowing the audience a position of moral superiority over the play and its situations that is ultimately untenable. The comedy’s main problem is that Bertram appears not to deserve Helena. That problem, made more severe by his moral failings and her obvious virtues, works to dampen (though not wholly obscure) the fact that he is thrust unjustly into a marriage with one whom, in Hermia’s terms, “his soul consents not to give sovereignty.” Characters like Hermia or Desdemona make clear how readily audiences tend to support choices in love, so Shakespeare puts Bertram in a generically favorable position, then explodes it, while dressing up Helena’s unjust claim to him so well as to almost make her seem wholly generous in forcing the marriage through. While critics reasonably have taken either side against the other, the play will not allow its audience to do so. Instead, it seems to force spectators into taking both sides simultaneously, the resulting moral dilemma producing an effect both alienating and engaging, along with a sense of moral superiority that is simultaneously undermined and ultimately untenable. By means of the problem, Shakespeare develops a tragic effect that resembles what audiences typically experience trying to assess and assign blame and justice in plays like *Othello*. In *All’s Well*, then, the lingering dissatisfaction associated with productions may derive from our latent awareness that the justice of Helena’s triumph is deeply unjust to Bertram. Our generic duty regarding the ending thus is set at odds with our sense of justice, allowing a spectator to depart the theater as much in the position of a tragic protagonist as one who has recently watched one on stage.

Oliver Morgan, Université de Genève

Parts and turns in *All’s Well That Ends Well*

This paper is about the performability of Shakespearean dialogue. It brings together two approaches that have so far had little contact. The first is the theory of parts, as expounded by Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern. The second is what we might call a ‘turn-taking’ approach, derived from interactional linguistics. This treats dialogue as fictionalised conversation, asking how the characters (as opposed to the actors) know when to speak. Or rather, it charts an ongoing negotiation between them over how the exchange of speech is organised—over whose turn it is to talk at any given moment.

There is a productive tension, I will argue, between the two approaches. On the one hand—as an attention to turn-taking makes clear—Shakespearean dialogue is replete with subtle effects of timing and sequence that would seem to call for careful rehearsal and a detailed knowledge of the script. On the other hand, everything we know about early modern drama suggests it was performed with minimal rehearsal, by actors who did not necessarily know when, or from where, their next cue would be coming. This apparent mismatch I call ‘the performability gap’.

The aim of the paper is to explore the implications of this gap in a short extract from *All's Well That Ends Well*—the Countess wheedling Helena into a confession her love for Bertram in 1.3 (TLN 460-525). Helena’s characteristic reticence, her frequent stutters, hesitations, and false starts, in combination with the insistent probing of her future mother-in-law, bring such issues sharply into focus.

Bernice Mittertreiner Neal, York University

"Ring-Carrier[s]": Courtiership by Object in *All's Well That Ends Well*

This paper considers how *All's Well That Ends Well* embeds a double ring-plot into a larger letter-plot to materialize the way courtly alliances are made (or unmade). Letters and rings in action both point to and enable courtly work: they are both symbolic and efficacious things. Helen's ability to manipulate rings given to and withheld from her makes her a courtier to be reckoned with. Her standing in court at the end of the play is perhaps more potent than her husband's and certainly beyond that which her position as Lord Bertram's wife might afford her. Rings in action, materializing by the end of the play a previously undramatized allegiance between Helen and the King, establish for Helen the possibility of action as a successful courtier within a patriarchal order despite her status as an orphan and independent of her marital bonds.

Bethany Packard, Transylvania University

Possible Pregnancy and Illusory Power in *All's Well That Ends Well*

All early modern pregnancies could be called possible until labor retroactively confirmed them, as there were no definitive means of confirming conception. Yet with Helena’s pregnancy announcement in Act 5 of *All's Well That Ends Well* Shakespeare goes out of his way to highlight the ambiguity of her condition, for instance eliminating his source’s birth of twin boys and eschewing physical description of Helena. Critics such as Caroline Bicks and Kathryn Moncrief have addressed the ramifications Helena’s pregnancy announcement within the play and acknowledged its unconfirmed nature. Building on this work, I specifically consider possible pregnancy as a maybe-conception that, by design, can never be confirmed or refuted. In *All's Well* possible pregnancy not only intensifies the instability of the end, it retrospectively highlights instabilities in the power structure present from the start.

Helena’s possible pregnancy is the understandable outcome of the play’s repeated undermining of assumptions about patrilineal descent as a functional source of authority and engine of cultural reproduction. Shakespeare introduces Helena and Bertram through

their obligation to and inheritances from their dead fathers. They face an excess of parental figures, living and dead, biological, legal, and volunteer, who impose numerous and contradictory expectations. These elders regularly intervene in the supposedly fixed system of inheritance they advocate. The possible pregnancy is Helena's opportunity to rewrite the past and recreate a new future with Bertram. Helena's pregnancy announcement makes her body's inscrutability into a continuation of the play's longstanding uncertainty about the nature of familial and political bonds and their ability to sustain the society. She embodies unanswerable questions about the unstable past, present, and future.

Rachel Prusko, University of Alberta

“By heaven, I’ll steal away”: Runaway Youth in *All’s Well That Ends Well*

This essay considers the relationship between the flight of the young characters in *All’s Well* and their subject positions as young people. Bertram and Helen figure their departures as a kind of theft: Bertram, too young to go to war, seizes on Paroles’ suggestion to “steal away bravely” (2.1.29), an honorable “theft,” according to a Lord. Planning her own flight, Helen later echoes this language: “Come, night; end, day; / For with the dark, poor thief, I’ll steal away” (3.3.128-29). I suggest that flight institutes not only a geographic but also a personal dislocation: running from subject positions conferred on them by parents, guardians, age, class, and gender, Bertram and Helen destabilize a youthful subjectivity that the Countess universalizes as “the show and seal of nature’s truth” (1.3.132). In effect, these young characters steal *themselves* from the people and structures who would determine who they are. Not merely running, they are running *away*: they run to leave versions of themselves behind, if only for a time.

Of particular interest to my analysis of transgressive flight is the young characters’ situation as wards. Scholarship on the wardship system in Renaissance England points to the complex experience of minors parented by guardians, illustrating both the hardships of a system that privileged guardians’ economic gain (Dubrow, *Shakespeare and Domestic Loss*) and also its potential benefits for wards (Shin, “Single and Surrogate Parenting”). For both Bertram and Helen, the complexities of wardship interrupt and complicate a straightforward progression to adulthood. My essay will explore how fractured families and the functioning of the wardship system contribute to the reconstitution of young selves in *All’s Well*.

Marsha S. Robinson, Kean University

The Arraignment of Bertram: *All’s Well That Ends Well* and the Battle of the Sexes

In *All’s Well That Ends Well* Shakespeare’s protagonists voice and embody the well-known claims and gender stereotypes popularized in defenses of women and their refutations. The play recreates the battle of the sexes by appropriating the genre’s deployment of military metaphors and the trial structure of the judicial oration to address “one facet of the controversy” about women--“which sex is to blame for sexual offenses”

(Woodbridge 38, 96 303). Linda Woodbridge has argued that, in 16th and early 17th century plays with female protagonists “Woman is on trial, as she was in the writings of the formalist controversy; the misogynist is her accuser” (290). *All's Well That Ends Well* reverses the expected roles. The genre's defense of chastity as a female virtue is countered by the play's arraignment and trial of the male protagonist as a sexual aggressor, a trial orchestrated by an alliance of females. Contrary to the expected outcome in such debates, the male sex is defeated and the female sex vindicated in a play which takes the female side in its realistic staging of the women's controversy.

Marie Roche, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Parolles and Vernacular Theology

This article revisits the character Parolles of *All's Well that Ends Well* (AWEW) by William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and argues that Parolles is a subversive voice in the play, having a critical role in the quest for Truth in a world that does not know where to find it. This essay starts with an etymological study of the word *parole*, contextualizing the word and its usage in Renaissance England, France, and Italy. It then contends that the character Parolles in AWEW has been misunderstood, and proposes a tropological approach to Parolles that suggests a participatory exegesis on Shakespeare's part, an example of vernacular theology on the stage that reflects on humanity and its search for Truth. The last section focuses on Act 4.1, in which Parolles is blindfolded and taken in an ambush, and argues that this scene is suggestive of an act of redemption of speech.

Kathleen Kalpin Smith, University of South Carolina, Aiken

“Limed with the twigs that threaten them”: All's Well That Ends Well and the Language of Entrapment

Mariana: “Many a maid hath been seduced by them; and the misery is, example, that so terrible shows in the wrack of maidenhood, cannot for all that dissuade succession but that they are limed with the twigs that threaten them” (3.5.15-18)

At the center of the resolution of *All's Well That Ends Well* is an off-stage bed trick that enables Helena to achieve her happy ending. *All's Well* also features several characters who refer to the laying of traps, including Mariana in the passage above. In my paper, I explore the language of trickery and entrapment in the play, in particular references to the hunting of birds, and I compare these examples to the language of trickery in love. While Mariana refers to maidens being seduced by men in terms of bird traps, the Lords also describe their trap for Parolles in terms of the same kind of lime-stick trap. I argue that by placing these three cases side by side, Parolles's trap, Helena's bed trick, and the trapping of birds with lime-sticks, we can see that the play commends Helena's entrapment of Bertram as a necessary correction to his resistance to appropriate domestication.

Leslie Thomson, University of Toronto

“Pronouns in Performance: *All's Well That Ends Well* – a case study”

The few extant examples of an early modern player's “part” consist only of his speeches and short cues from the speeches of the player(s) with whom he is interacting. The part did not tell the player *how* to interact with those other figures. Nevertheless, the players' parts were their main preparation tool in a time when the practice of performing a different play each day meant that opportunities for rehearsal were minimal at best. These facts have led me to approach the speeches as a player might have done, trying to find clues (if not cues) about how he was to behave once out on stage with others. In this paper I consider whether second person pronouns – *thou/thee/thy* versus *you/ye/your* – might sometimes have functioned as implicit stage directions. In asking this question my premise is not that Shakespeare consciously and deliberately used these elements of speech, because for him and his audience their use was instinctive. But I contend that the use of *you* or *thou* forms could have given a player information about his character's personal and therefore physical relationships with other characters. This would have helped not only as he learned his part but also as he spoke the words in performance. Even today, for ears attuned to their significance these pronouns can signal blocking and therefore visually convey the relative power of onstage figures as they speak to each other.