

Alls well



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In order to understand the moral implications of the bed-trick in Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, one must examine who is involved in the scheme and to what end. Once this is clear, it becomes obvious that the bed-trick has no moral message in and of itself; rather, the bed-trick is, according to William Bowman, "a morally neutral device" used by Shakespeare in a "moral context." The bed-trick is an off-stage event that contributes to the play's characterization as a "problem comedy," not only because of the not-so-happy ending, but because it deceives the audience into thinking the trickster's intentions are fully justified.

It is generally accepted that comedy should be responsive to the desires of the audience, that it have a moral function, and that it supply a happy ending. *All's Well That Ends Well* in a sense does respond to the needs of the audience by bringing two potential lovers together. The main character, Helena, obtains the one person she has yearned for all her life, Count Bertram. The one thing that the play is lacking is the typical comedic happy ending due to the fact that Helena and Bertram are united solely because of Helena's manipulation of certain situations.

The first situation Helena finds herself in is that she wants to earn a husband. In order to do so, she plans to heal the sick King in order to be repaid with the man of her choice. Helena is successful, and her reward is the choice of any man in the kingdom. Helena chooses Count Bertram. The Count, however, in no way desires Helena, and he is forced by the King to marry her. To avoid having to consummate the marriage, Bertram goes to war. While there, he begins to woo an Italian maiden named Diana. His plan is to bed Diana without being obligated to her later. Helena ends up in Italy,

happens upon Diana and finds out about Bertram's scheme. This is the second situation Helena finds herself in. How is she to thwart her husband's intentions toward Diana? She manipulates this situation by using the bed-trick.

The mechanics of the bed-trick are as follows: Diana agrees to lie with Bertram, but Helena takes her place without him knowing. The reasons why Helena uses the bed-trick must be examined. As stated before, the bed-trick is morally neutral, and its ethics are determined by the person who uses it and for what purposes. In most cases, a bed-trick is morally sound if it is utilized by a good person for virtuous reasons. At first glance Helena may seem moral due to the fact that her use of the bed-trick stops her husband from committing adultery, and in turn helps Diana stay chaste. These can be considered moral ends, and the audience is meant to feel that they are. The problem, however, lies in the fact that Helena plots the trick for her own selfish reasons.

At the beginning of the play, it is evident that Helena is lusting after someone. She discusses the issue of her virginity at length with Parolles in act one and seeks his advice on how to guard herself against assailants, "Man is enemy to virginity; how/ may we barricado it against him?" (1. 1. 112-113). Parolles offers simple advice, "Keep him out." (1. 1. 114). However, Helena acknowledges that perhaps she is unable to guard her chastity for very long-- "But he assails, and our virginity though/ valiant, in the defense yet is weak..." (1. 1. 115-116). Parolles believes that women have no resistance over wanton men, and therefore tells Helena that "There is none. Man, setting down before you,/ will undermine you and blow you up." (1. 1.

118-119). Parolles constantly scorns virginity-- "'Tis a commodity will lose the gloss with/ lying: the longer kept, the less worth. Off with't/ while 'tis vendible..." (1. 1. 153-155); and his words are very convincing. Helena accepts what he is saying and comes to the conclusion that she will make sure she has a lot to say about how and to whom she give up her chastity-- "How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own/ liking?" (1. 1. 151).

When she is left alone in her thoughts at the end of the scene, Helena's plan to cure the King and win her love whose " power is it which mounts her love so high..."(1. 1. 220) comes into focus:

To show her merit, that did miss her love?

The King's disease-- my project may deceive me,

But my intents are fix'd, and will not leave me. (1. 1. 226-229)

This speech also reveals another side of Helena. According to Eileen Cohen, Helena indicates " that virgins do fall in love and do passionately feel desire... she acknowledges the sexuality of love and marriage; indeed she welcomes it." The point that must be made is that her determination to heal the King is not a selfless act, there are ulterior motives.

At first Helena believes that perhaps she is not a worthy candidate for the Count-- "'Twere all one/ That I should love a bright particular star/ And think to wed it, he is so above me..." (1. 185-87); but she is so fixated on her desire to have him in marriage and in bed that she is determined not to fail. Helena makes the decision to lose her virginity and she wishes to do so within the institution of marriage. Sex in marriage is certainly a moral act, but the problem lies in the fact that Helena wants this to happen with someone who does not want her in return. Securing a marriage to Bertram is

the easy part, and Helena confesses to the Countess that she indeed will not fail in healing the King:

More than my father's skill, which was the great'st  
Of his profession, that his good receipt  
By th'luckiest stars in heaven, and would your honor  
But give me leave to try success, I'd venture  
The well-lost life of mine on his Grace's cure  
Helena. Ay, madam, knowingly. (1. 3. 243-250)

It has been established that a bed-trick will be a success only if the character who employs it does so for moral reasons. It is interesting to note that Helena's bed-trick is successful even though it has been established that her intentions are not moral ones. In this instance it is up to the dramatist whether or not the bed-trick will work. Shakespeare deceives the audience into thinking Helena's actions are virtuous. He achieves this in two ways: the first way is by convincing the audience that Helena is a good person by contrasting her character with Count Bertram; and secondly, the other characters in the play place Helena in the highest regard.

William Bowden states that " if we accept the not wholly logical ethics of the stage, we are compelled to weigh the morality of certain bed tricks by the attractiveness of the perpetrators and the unattractiveness of the victims." Bertram is in no way an attractive character. He cruelly rejects Helena because of her birth-- " She had her breeding ay my father's charge--/ A poor physician's daughter my wife! Disdain/ Rather corrupt me ever!" (2. 3. 114-116). Bertram avoids the social obligation he has to Helena and the court-- " O my Parolles, they have married me!/ I'll to the Tuscan wars, and never bed

her." (2. 3. 272-273). Worst of all, he openly pursues Diana and lies in order to satisfy his own wicked desires for sex:

I prithee do not strive against my vows.

I was compell'd to her, but I love thee

By love's own sweet constraint, and will forever

Do thee all rights of service. (4. 2. 14-17)

He becomes the "enemy to virginity" mentioned in act one. By contrast, Helena is seen as the right candidate for Bertram, and later vindicated in her plot to consummate their marriage even though Bertram refuses.

Shakespeare shapes our perception of Helena through the opinions of the Countess, Parolles, and the King. They repeatedly refer to Helena as being desirable, virtuous and moral, thus convincing the audience that she is so. It is also true that these characters have something to gain from Helena. The Countess wants a daughter:

Why not a mother? When I said "a mother,"

Me thought you saw a serpent. What's in "mother,"

That you start at? I say I am your mother,

And put you in the catalogue of those

That were enwombed mine. 'Tis often seen

Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds

A native slip to us from foreign seeds.

You ne'er oppress'd me with a mother's groan,

Yet I express to you a mother's care.

God's mercy, maiden! does it curd thy blood

To say I am thy mother?... (1. 3. 138-150)

Parolles is just as fixated on Helena's success in marriage and sexuality as she herself is-- " Get thee a good husband, and use him as he/ uses thee" (1. 1. 214-215). Finally, the King was sick and Helena healed him. As a king, he obviously has great influence and insists that Bertram marry because his own " honor's at stake" (2. 3. 149) if Bertram does not marry Helena due to that fact that she healed him-- " Know'st thou not, Bertram,/ What she has done for me?" (2. 3. 109). Primarily they wish to straighten out Bertram and restore him " to his social position." The fact that the bed-trick allows for moral ends by straightening out Bertram, convinces us that Helena's use of the bed-trick is right.

The plan to heal the King and win Bertram would have been fine if Bertram ended up loving Helena in return, but he did not. Although Bertram is certainly not the epitome of morality and virtue, this does not give Helena the right to have him sexually. Helena herself is fully aware that if she uses the bed-trick, it is not fully justified:

Let us assay our plot, which if it speed,  
Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact.

She dismisses the contradiction between what is lawful and what is sinful and gives into her desires for Bertram. She goes through with the bed-trick and deceives him into doing what he did not want. The bed-trick did not happen on-stage, and Bertram later appears grateful that he did not commit adultery. These two facts lead us to believe that Bertram is not a victim, in fact we feel indifferent toward the situation.

The ramifications of the bed-trick, though not blatantly obvious, do shape the ending of *All's Well That Ends Well*. Bertram and Helena do end up together, but the ending is problematic. David Kaston reveals that " Helena succeeds, only to discover that her success is merely formal... she is forced to see that happy endings so obviously manipulated will not satisfy-- not even the successful manipulator," meaning that the audience gets their happy ending, but all is certainly not well for the characters. The fact remains that Bertram's love for Helena was not freely given, he simply conformed. His love was manipulated by Helena and the Court.

For a play to be comedic, it must bring two people together, but the ending of *All's Well That Ends Well* is problematic because the union is too contrived. Throughout the play Helena is determined that things go her way. She uses the bed-trick to manipulate a situation that would otherwise be against her. At no time does she even consider Bertram's feelings, she simply wants to control his sexual actions and lose her virginity within the institution of marriage, thus appearing virtuous. The audience agrees with the portrayal of a good Helena because the other characters' constant reference to her virtue and the fact that her bed-trick straightens out Bertram's folly and helps Diana preserve her chastity.

Bibliography: