All's Well that Ends Well

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The play does not have important relations to any specific historical events, but can be usefully contextualized in the early modern or Renaissance period, reflected in the highly stratified society of the play's world, with a strict social hierarchy and restrictive gender roles that traditionally offer few opportunities for women.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The basic plot of *All's Well that Ends Well* is based on a story from Giovanni Boccaccio's collection of tales, the *Decameron*, written in Italian. Shakespeare was likely familiar with an English version of this tale in a collection of stories called *The Palace of Pleasure*, written by an Englishman named William Painter.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *All's Well that Ends Well*
- **When Written:** Between 1602 and 1607
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance (1500-1660)
- **Genre:** Drama, Comedy
- **Setting:** Rossillion and Paris, France; Florence, Italy
- **Climax:** Helen, thought by most characters to be dead, dramatically returns to Rossillion and tells Bertram that she has fulfilled his seemingly impossible conditions for being his wife.
- **Antagonist:** Bertram

EXTRA CREDIT

All Problems Solved? While usually categorized as a comedy, *All's Well that Ends Well* is often grouped with some other Shakespearean plays that have come to be called "problem plays," because it doesn't fit easily into any genre, due to the fact that it raises numerous questions about its own happy ending. How a reader categorizes the play is ultimately a product of how a reader interprets the play's ambiguous conclusion.

PLOT SUMMARY

At Rossillion, Bertram—the young count of Rossillion—is preparing to leave to go stay with the king of France, who will look after him since his father has recently died. His mother, the countess, is sad to see him go, and discusses the fact that the king is very ill. She mentions a famous doctor who might have been able to help heal him, but he has recently died, and left his daughter Helen under the countess' care. Standing nearby, Helen is crying, and the countess thinks she is mourning her father. After Bertram and everyone else leaves, though, Helen reveals that she is crying because she is hopelessly in love with Bertram, who is so far above her in society that she has no hope of marrying him. Bertram's friend Parolles enters and talks coarsely about virginity with Helen, encouraging her not to keep it for too long. After the two trade some witty quips, Parolles leaves and Helen develops a plan for trying to get Bertram.

At the king's court in Paris, the king decides not to interfere in a dispute between the Italian cities of Florence and Siena. He will allow any noblemen who want to fight go to Italy and join the dispute, though. Bertram arrives and the king greets him, remembering his father. The king adds that he wishes he were dead like Bertram's father, because he is so old and feeble. Back at Rossillion, the countess discusses Helen with her steward and learns that Helen loves Bertram. The countess calls for Helen and asks her if she has any feelings for Bertram. Helen confesses her love and begs the countess' pardon. The countess does not seem to mind, and asks Helen about her plans to go to Paris. Helen says that she has some strong medicines that her father left her that she thinks can help the king, and wants to go to Paris to try to cure him. She admits, though, that her real motive for going to Paris is to see Bertram. The countess says that the king probably won't even let Helen try to cure him, since she is only "a poor unlearned virgin," but encourages her to go anyway.

Back at the royal court, the king bids farewell to some noblemen who are going off to fight in Italy. Bertram is upset that he is not allowed to go join the fight, because the king says

he is too young. A French nobleman named Lafew asks the king if he will try any remedies for his illness, but the king refuses, having resigned himself to his own death. Lafew tells him that a young female doctor has come to help him, and the king lets her come see him, though he is skeptical. Helen tells the king that she has medicines from her famous father that could help him, but the king refuses to believe that a young girl could help him when all his doctors have failed to. Helen says that she will bet her own life that she can cure him. Impressed, the king says he will allow her to try to heal him, and will reward her with the choice of any husband from his court if she should be successful. At Rossillion, the countess orders the fool to bear a letter to Helen in Paris. After some clever joking and teasing of the countess, the fool leaves with the letter.

In Paris, Parolles, Bertram, and Lafew remark on the king's miraculous recovery and agree that God has healed the king through the weak "minister" of Helen. The king enters with Helen and has all his noblemen line up. He tells Helen that she can choose any of them she wishes to be her husband. Helen speaks to several lords, before settling on Bertram and saying, "this is the man." Bertram is immediately upset and doesn't want to marry Helen. The king chastises Bertram for disliking Helen only for her lower social status, and orders Bertram to marry her. Bertram relents, and the two marry that night. Afterwards, Bertram tells Parolles that he plans to go fight in Italy and never return home to Helen. He says that he will never sleep with Helen, and Parolles and Bertram make preparations to go to Italy. Helen receives the fool's letter from the countess, and then learns from paroles that Bertram is going to Italy and wants her to return to Rossillion. She says she will obey her husband's command. Before Bertram leaves Paris, Lafew advises him not to trust Parolles, and says that Parolles is actually a coward and Bertram has misjudged his friend's character. Bertram bids goodbye to Helen, and then tells Parolles that he will never see her again. The two then leave for Italy.

In Florence, the duke welcomes the French noblemen who have come to help them, and says they will go to the battlefield the next day. Back in Rossillion, the countess receives a letter from Bertram, in which he tells her that he has decided never to sleep with Helen and has run away to Italy. The countess is furious with Bertram. Helen arrives and shows the countess a letter that she has received from her husband, in which he says that he will never be her husband until she gets his ancestral **ring** off his finger and is pregnant with his child. The countess is upset with her son and tells Helen that she considers her a daughter. She leaves Helen alone, and Helen decides to leave Rossillion, since the only reason Bertram has no plans to return home is to avoid her, and she doesn't want to be the cause of his being in danger in Italy. Meanwhile, in Italy, the duke of Florence puts Bertram in charge of his cavalry, and Bertram promises to devote himself to war and be a "hater of love." In Rossillion, the countess finds a letter left by Helen that informs her that Helen has left to go on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Jaques, so that Bertram can return home. The countess is even angrier with her son, and writes to him so that he will come home.

In Florence, a disguised Helen runs into a widow and her daughter, named Diana. She learns that Bertram has been trying to seduce Diana, but Diana has been defending her chastity against him. Elsewhere in Florence, a group of French noblemen warn Bertram that he should not trust Parolles. They devise a plan to expose Parolles as the coward he is by sending him on a mission to recover a lost military drum. Then, they will ambush him, kidnap and blindfold him, and pretend to be the enemy. They tell Bertram that Parolles will divulge secrets and betray his allies in order to save his own life. Bertram agrees to the plan, and then goes off to try to seduce Diana. At Diana's home, Helen reveals her true identity and promises the widow gold if she and Diana will help her with her plan. She wants Diana to pretend to give in to Bertram's advances in return for his ancestral **ring**. Then, at night, Helen will take Diana's place in her bed and sleep with Bertram in the dark. Diana and the widow agree to cooperate.

Having gone to find the drum, Parolles decides to pretend that he has tried to find it and faced the enemy by giving himself some small wounds. He is ambushed, though, by the French noblemen, who blindfold him and speak in nonsense so that he thinks they are speaking a foreign language. They tell Parolles that his life will be spared if he can give them valuable information about the Florentine forces, and Parolles says, "all the secrets of our camp I'll show." Elsewhere in Florence, Bertram continues to try to seduce Diana. Diana asks Bertram to give her his **ring**, and he resists but finally agrees to, thinking that he has won her over.

Two French noblemen discuss some recent news they have learned: Helen has apparently died on her pilgrimage, Bertram has "incurred the everlasting displeasure" of the king and the countess, and Siena and Florence have made a peace treaty. Bertram enters and the noblemen have Parolles brought in. Parolles betrays his allies and speaks ill of Bertram, trying to save his life from who he thinks are enemy soldiers. The noblemen finally remove his blindfold, and Bertram and the others desert him, planning to return to France. The next day, after Helen's plan has been carried out successfully, she journeys with the widow and Diana to Marseilles, where they hope to find the king of France. In Rossillion, the countess and Lafew lament Helen's supposed death. Lafew tells the countess that he has spoken to the king about Bertram possibly marrying his daughter now, and the countess says that she approves of this match. Bertram arrives at Rossillion.

Helen, the widow, and Diana arrive in Marseilles only to learn that the king has gone to Rossillion. Helen gives a letter to a gentleman to deliver to the king, before the three set out for

Rossillion. Parolles arrives in Rossillion and finds Lafew. He tells Lafew what has happened to him and begs him "to bring me in some grace." Lafew allows Parolles to enter into his service, though he calls him a knave. Having arrived in Rossillion, the king speaks with the countess and mourns the loss of Helen. He says that he has forgiven Bertram, though, and now wants Bertram to marry Lafew's daughter. Bertram enters and apologizes to the king for deserting and dishonoring Helen. The king tells him not to dwell on the past, and informs him of the plans to marry him to Lafew's daughter. Lafew asks Bertram for a token to give to his daughter as a gift from him, and Bertram gives him a ring that, he believes, Diana gave him in Florence (in fact it was Helen who gave it to him while they were sleeping together). The king recognizes the ring as one he gave to Helen, and questions Bertram about it. Bertram denies that the ring was Helen's and the king calls him a liar. He wonders if Bertram had something to do with Helen's death, and has him carried away.

The gentleman Helen met in Marseilles arrives and delivers her letter to the king. It is written by Diana and accuses Bertram of promising to marry her and then running away after taking her virginity. The king sends for Diana, and Lafew says that he will not let his daughter marry Bertram now. Bertram and Diana are brought forth, and Bertram calls Diana a liar. Diana produces Bertram's ancestral **ring** as proof of his promises to her, and the countess recognizes the **ring**, seeing it as proof of the attachment between Diana and Bertram. Diana offers to give Bertram his **ring** back in exchange for hers (the ring Helen gave Bertram), and the king asks Diana how she got Helen's ring. The king is ready to throw Diana in prison, when Helen finally enters, to the amazement of everyone who thought she was dead. Helen tells Bertram that she has fulfilled his conditions (she is bearing his child, and has gotten his ancestral **ring** from him), and he says that he will love her and be her husband. Realizing what has happened, the king says that Diana can choose any husband she wants from his court, as long as she is "yet a fresh uncropped flower." He ends the play by saying, "all yet seems well, and if it end so meet, / The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet," emphasizing how everything has apparently come to a happy end. Just after, the king comes back on the stage in a brief epilogue where he re-emphasizes that "all is well ended" and asks the audience to applaud.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Helen – The protagonist of the play, Helen is strong-willed and clever. She is a remarkably active and powerful female character in a society where women are assumed to be weak and inferior to men. She takes her fate into her own hands by boldly betting her own life on her ability to cure the king's illness, and thereby winning Bertram's hand in marriage—against his will. She promises to be an obedient and submissive wife to Bertram, but when he betrays and abandons her, she devises a clever scheme to win him back: she has Diana pretend to agree to sleep with him and then takes Diana's place in bed, thereby getting the consummation of her marriage that Bertram denied her. After faking her own death, she returns to Rossillion at the very end of the play to reveal the truth about Bertram and Diana's relationship and to show Bertram that she has fulfilled his requirements for being his wife.

Bertram – Bertram can be seen as the antagonist of the play, as he abandons Helen and tries to prevent her from attaining her ultimate goal of marrying him and being in a relationship with him. However, at times he can seem like a sympathetic character who is forced into a marriage with a woman he doesn't love. He may be overly concerned with social class, as the king thinks that the only reason he doesn't love Helen is because she is of a lower class than he is. He shamelessly tries to seduce Diana while in Florence and gives her his ancestral **ring** in order to woo her, not realizing that Diana is in cahoots with Helen. Early in the play, Bertram is influenced by his friend Parolles, who he thinks is a trustworthy ally, but in Florence he learns that Parolles is actually a lying coward, and abandons him. At the end of the play, Bertram claims to have a change of heart, and pledges to love Helen as his wife, but the truth of this vow is highly debatable. He may be lying to Helen again, and he may simply be trying not to incur the king's anger by dishonoring Helen further. The ambiguity of his vow to love Helen thus raises serious questions about whether all really has ended well by the end of the play.

The Countess of Rossillion – The mother of Bertram, who also essentially adopts Helen after her father's death. She is kind and supportive to Helen, and is not upset when she learns of Helen's love for her son. She becomes increasingly upset with Bertram when he abandons and dishonors Helen, even claiming that he is no longer her son at one point.

The King of France – The king of France is at the absolute top of the social hierarchy in the play, and is able to order others around, as when he compels Bertram to marry Helen against his will. Gravely ill at the beginning of the play, the king has given up all hope of recovery and is resigned to his own death. At the end of the play, the king tries to push the play to move toward a happy ending. He encourages everyone to forget about Helen and wants Bertram to move on and marry Lafew's daughter. When Helen returns and everything seems resolved, he emphasizes how all the problems of the play have come to happy conclusions both at the end of Act 5 and in the brief epilogue.

The Fool – A kind of jester in the service of the countess at Rossillion. High-ranking characters like Lafew and the countess order him around, but he is generally disobedient and teases his superiors with his clever wit and wordplay. Through his joking, he is able to exercise a slight bit of power against his

social superiors who outrank him in the society's rigid social hierarchy.

Parolles – A friend of Bertram, Parolles is a deceitful, tricky character. Bertram trusts him early on in the play, even though Lafew and other French noblemen try to warn him that Parolles is a liar. Parolles brags about his bravery in war, but in Florence is proved to be actually a coward, when a group of French soldiers kidnap him and pretend to be enemy forces. Parolles almost immediately promises to divulge military secrets and betray Bertram in order to save his own life. When Bertram learns of Parolles' true character, he leaves his former friend behind. By the end of the play, Parolles has fallen significantly in society, and must beg Lafew to let him serve him.

Lafew – A French nobleman and friend of both the king and the countess. He strongly dislikes Parolles and advises Bertram not to trust him. Later in the play, when Helen is supposedly dead, he tries to get Bertram to marry his daughter, but then withdraws this offer when Bertram appears to have slept with Diana.

Diana – A young Florentine woman whom Bertram tries to seduce. Diana resists his advances, preferring to maintain her chastity, and then cooperates with Helen's plan in pretending to agree to sleep with him in return for his **ring**. She then goes to the king of France and claims that Bertram has abandoned her after promising to marry her. After everything is resolved at the end of the play, the king promises her any husband she should choose—provided that she is still a virgin.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Steward – A steward serving the countess at Rossillion. In Act 1, he overhears Helen talking of her love for Bertram, and informs the countess about it.

The Duke of Florence – The leader of Florence, to whose aid numerous French noblemen and soldiers come, as Florence finds itself in a military feud with Siena.

The Widow – Diana's mother, who agrees to help Helen with her plot to trick Bertram, and is rewarded with gold by Helen for her assistance.

Mariana – The widow of Diana's neighbor, who is with the widow and Diana when they run into a disguised Helen. She warns Diana not to give into Bertram's courting and to protect her virginity and chastity.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

VIRGINITY, SEX, AND MARRIAGE

The central plot of *All's Well that Ends Well* revolves around the marriage between Bertram and Helen, and his refusal to consummate it by sleeping with her. Issues of virginity, sex, and marriage pervade the play even beyond these two characters' relationship, though, with even the fool wanting to get married and Diana (who is named after the Roman goddess of virginity) defending her chastity against the advances of Bertram. Shakespeare's comedy pokes some fun at traditional ideas about virginity as a precious thing kept safe until marriage, when a husband and wife finally sleep together as part of their happy union. Parolles' argument to Helen early in the play, for example, condemns virginity as cold and unnatural, and he encourages Helen to lose hers as soon as possible. Repeated similes in the play compare love to war and wooing to besieging a city, portraying sex less as a consensual act between married partners and more as a man's battering down the defenses of a resisting woman. (Bertram and Helen's relationship, though, flips this dynamic, with Helen trying to get Bertram into bed with her.) Moreover, the high value of chastity as a precious thing has the unintended consequence that women are able to use it strategically, like a bargaining chip. Diana is able to manipulate Bertram by withholding sex and then appearing to give in to him, while Helen uses sex with Bertram to trick him into fulfilling his duty as her husband.

If the realities of sex and virginity in the play don't exactly match up to traditional ideals of them, neither do the realities of marriage. Ideally, marriage unities two loving partners, but this is not exactly so in the play. Marriage is Helen's reward for curing the king, and Bertram is forced into his marriage against his will by the king. Additionally, while Helen professes that she really does love Bertram, she may also partially desire to marry him because of his high social status. Marrying him allows her to move up the ladder of the social hierarchy. And when Helen appears to be dead, Lafew strategizes to get Bertram to marry his own daughter, showing that marriage is often about strategizing the union of families and movement through the highly stratified social order.

At the end of the play, the king still uses marriage as a reward for Diana, telling her that she can marry anyone she chooses—on the condition that she is still a virgin. Thus, issues of virginity and marriage remain important to the society represented in the play, even if they function in ways rather different from the ideals society treats them as. Shakespeare does not contest the central importance of sex and marriage to the society of his time, but suggests that the way these matters play out is often much more complicated and less becoming than society often thinks.

SOCIAL CLASSES

Shakespeare's play takes place in a world with a rigid social hierarchy, reflecting the social world of the early modern England in which Shakespeare lived. Society is divided along lines of class, with the king at the very top, and under him various levels of noblemen (including those with and without titles like "Count of Rossillion"), those who fall somewhere in the middle (such as Helen), and lower-class soldiers and peasants. A character's place in this social order is more than just a matter of relative wealth; it determines many things about his or her life. Helen at first has no hope of marrying Bertram because of their class difference: as she puts it, he is so far out of her reach that it is as if he is a star in the sky to her. And the only reason Helen finally is able to marry Bertram is through the power of the king, who is at the top of the social hierarchy and thus has the power to compel Bertram to marry Helen.

But despite the rigid social structure of the world of the play, there is some class mobility. The king and the countess both recognize Helen's virtues in spite of her class status, and the king even delivers a stirring speech to Bertram in which he says that all people's blood is the same, and that Helen's low title is a minor matter because of her natural virtues. By marrying Bertram, Helen actually is able to move up the social ladder. Similarly, Diana and her mother, the widow, attain wealth by helping Helen and—as the king promises Diana a husband—have hope at the end of the play of moving upward in society, as well. Even the lowly fool is able to get back at his social superiors in his own subtle way, with his clever wit, through which he teases and combats those who order him around. There is thus a degree of flexibility and ambiguity in the apparently strictly stratified social order. But social flexibility and mobility is not always a good thing. As Parolles' true character is revealed, he drops in everyone's esteem and also in social class, going from a noble friend of Bertram to a lower attendant of Lafew, as we can tell when Lafew addresses him as "sirrah," a term for social inferiors. Thus, while Shakespeare depicts the rigid social hierarchy of his day and how it dictates many facets of people's lives, he also shows how exceptional people can maneuver their way through this hierarchy and climb up the social ladder—or, as in Parolles' case, slide perilously down it.

REMEDY AND RESOLUTION

The title of *All's Well that Ends Well* marks the play's interest in positive resolutions and happy endings. Indeed, one of the defining features of comedy as a genre is this kind of happy ending that supposedly makes the problems of the play go away, such that all really is well that ends well. Throughout the play, Shakespeare plays with this comedic convention. There are many problems in the play that find strikingly easy or quick resolutions. The king, for example, is completely resigned to his own death early in the play, but is healed miraculously quickly by Helen's medicine. Helen begins the play with absolutely no hope of marrying Bertram, but then quickly finds a way to get him as her husband. And when he deserts her, she is able to trick him into sleeping with her and gets him to even proclaim that he will love her by the end of the play. Helen herself appears to be dead for quite some time, and—from the other characters' perspectives—miraculously comes back from the dead in act five. But before she does, the king easily (almost too easily) forgives Bertram for dishonoring Helen, and is ready to marry him to Lafew's daughter. Every dilemma, problem, and quandary in the play seems to find a happy resolution without too much trouble. At the end of the play, everything seems to be resolved and put in order—even Diana is promised a noble husband. The play's epilogue drives this point home. Even after act five concludes with the king announcing that all has come to a happy conclusion, he comes back on stage in the epilogue just to reiterate that "all is well ended." But all this insistence on the play's happy ending almost seems to protest too much—does everything really end well in the play?

Bertram professes his love for Helen, but he has not exactly been trustworthy throughout the whole play, and his stunningly quick change of mind may not be entirely believable. Moreover, the king and the countess repeatedly refer to their old age. The specter of death with which the play begins (with Bertram's and Helen's fathers dead and the king apparently dying) seems to hang over the play's happy ending to some degree. And for Parolles, all does not seem to have ended well. By the end of the play, the king's illness has been cured and Helen has gotten the husband of her dreams. But does this apparently happy conclusion really make all the deceit, loss, and pain of the earlier parts of the play simply okay, or negligible? Can the pervasive sadness of the beginning of the play—which opens with Helen weeping uncontrollably—be completely banished? In other words, is all actually well that ends well? By raising these kinds of issues, Shakespeare probes questions about the very nature of comedy and the possibility of a happy ending, even in the play of his that appears at first glance to give the best example of a happy comic resolution.

CHARACTER AND JUDGMENT

Many characters in this play make faulty assumptions about a person's character, only to discover later that someone they thought to be one kind of person is actually quite different. The king, for example, drastically underestimates Helen as a doctor, while Bertram gets himself into trouble because he misjudges Helen and doesn't realize how good of a wife she would make (mostly because he is fixated on her lower social status). The major example of this pattern in the play, though, is Bertram's misjudging the character of Parolles. He thinks that Parolles is a

brave and loyal friend, only to discover that he is actually an untrustworthy, cowardly traitor. Practically no one's character is not open to misjudging and reinterpretation over the course of the play. The countess must revise her idea of her own son, as she becomes increasingly frustrated with his behavior, while Helen can be seen as dramatically misunderstanding Bertram's character. She at first sees him as an excellent potential husband, but later learns from experience that he can be spiteful and unfaithful, as he deserts her and tries to sleep with Diana. The memorable trick in act four when Bertram mistakenly sleeps with Helen (thinking she is Diana) can even be seen as a comically literal version of this pattern of events, as Bertram literally misjudges the character he is in bed with.

All of these reversals of character could be taken to suggest that character is more of a fluid, changing thing than something innate and permanent. However, the end of Shakespeare's play seems to make a different point. Characters' inner natures appear to be constant—Parolles really is a cowardly liar, while Helen really is a virtuous woman. It is only people's judgments and estimations of others' character and personality that are inconstant. Characters in *All's Well that Ends Well* do seem to have a definitive personality, but how they are perceived by others changes drastically as the plot develops and their true colors are gradually revealed. Shakespeare's comedy thus shows the risks of forming an overly hasty judgment of someone's character based on limited knowledge, while also delighting in the humor and mishaps that these assumptions can cause.

GENDER ROLES

In addition to class distinctions, the social world of the play is structured also by a rigid hierarchy of gender (as was the society of Shakespeare's England), in which men exercise power and women are assumed to be inferior to men. But with *All's Well that Ends Well*, Shakespeare challenges traditional assumptions about gender in a variety of ways. First, the play is replete with clever and strong female characters. Helen takes an active role in seeking a husband, choosing Bertram rather than vice versa. Moreover, she actively pursues him after he deserts her. Additionally, the countess exercises a fair amount of power in Rossillion. With the absence of her husband (and with Bertram away for much of the play), she is essentially in control of Rossillion. And Diana and her mother (the widow) both team up with Helen in order to trick Bertram successfully, and gain a substantial fortune for themselves—not to mention a husband for Diana, assured by the king as a gift.

Second, assumptions regarding gender in the play are often revealed to be false. Helen is underestimated by the king early in the play, who doubts that she—a mere young girl—can heal him when his educated (male) doctors haven't been able to. But, of course, she is able to heal him. Also, masculinity is generally associated with war in the play. French noblemen and soldiers go off to Italy to show their military prowess and bravery, and Parolles and Bertram excitedly go there for similar reasons. But once there, Parolles displays cowardice rather than traditionally masculine bravery. And Bertram seems more interested in wooing Diana than in defending Florence. On a broader level, through repeated similes comparing love to war, the more traditionally feminine arena of domestic love becomes its own kind of battlefield—and the women of the play are its most skilled soldiers. The play thus challenges assumptions about brave men and subservient women, as well as the idea of a proper place or activity for each gender. While *All's Well that Ends Well* is a light comedy. it is remarkable for offering serious examples of female empowerment and poking holes in traditional Renaissance ideas about gender roles.

LIES, DECEIT, AND TRICKERY

All's Well that Ends Well is filled with dishonesty, from minor lies to deliberate acts of trickery to an entire life (that of Parolles) built upon deceit. The play's plot can be seen as an escalating and continuing series of deceptions and tricks culminating in the ultimate revelation of the truth in the final scene, when Helen returns to Rossillion. The play's first major deception is when Bertram marries Helen but then deserts her and refuses to sleep with her, sending her to Rossillion. Bertram continues to be a rather deceptive character, making false oaths to Diana in an attempt to seduce her. Bertram, though, is the victim of Parolles' own trickery, who makes the young count think that he is an honorable, trustworthy friend. And Parolles also betrays his Florentine allies, or at least thinks he does when he confesses secrets to his captors (French noblemen and soldiers in disguise).

With all of this deceit, practically no one in the play is completely honest or blameless. Helen lies about going on her pilgrimage, after all, and can even be seen as having tricked Bertram into marrying her. Diana and the widow also deceive Bertram with the trick of switching Diana and Helen in Diana's bed, so that Bertram mistakenly sleeps with Helen. Moreover, perhaps the most dishonest character in the play—Parolles—only has his deceit discovered through more trickery, as French soldiers pretend to be foreign enemies and kidnap him. If nearly all the characters in this comedy are constantly lying to and tricking each other, how can one sort out virtuous from bad characters or behavior? Perhaps the answer lies in the play's title: if all's well that ends well, then perhaps one can take this to suggest that the ends justify the means. Thus, Helen's trickery is justifiable because it leads to the just end of her being reunited with her husband. Similarly, Bertram's tricking Parolles is justifiable because it leads to the revelation of Parolles' true character. Dishonesty and deceit are thus not inherently or always bad in Shakespeare's play, depending on what uses they are put to.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BERTRAM'S RING

Bertram has an ancestral ring that has been passed down through his family for generations. As one of the conditions he gives Helen for making him truly her husband, he tells her that she will have to get this ring from him, thinking this task impossible. But he ends up giving this precious ring to Diana in order to woo her, unwittingly putting the ring into Helen's hands. Bertram's ring is a token of romantic affection and therefore a sign of fidelity or infidelity. In Diana's possession, the ring apparently proves that he has been unfaithful to Helen and has seduced Diana. In Helen's possession, the ring is proof that Bertram has actually been (unintentionally) faithful and slept with his wife. Additionally, through this ring, the reversal of typical gender roles in Helen and Bertram's relationship is made clear. Diana compares her valuable chastity to Bertram's precious ring, and indeed his ring can be seen as a symbol of a male form of chastity that Bertram does not want Helen to violate. Helen assumes the typically male role of trying to seduce her partner into sex and trying to take Bertram's ring just as a male suitor might try to "take" a woman's virginity from her. Because Bertram's ring is a family heirloom, it is also an important symbol of Bertram's noble heritage and high status in the social hierarchy as a count. The ring can be seen as representing Bertram's nobility itself—the prize Helen gets by marrying him (and thus marrying into a higher social class).

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *All's Well that Ends Well* published in 2006.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

My imagination
Carries no favor in 't but Bertram's.
I am undone. There is no living, none,
If Bertram be away. 'Twere all one
That I should love a bright particular star
And think to wed it, he is so above me.

Related Characters: Helen (speaker), Bertram

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.87-92

Explanation and Analysis

This quote brings up a force that will move the action forward for the entire play: Helen's desperate and unremitting love for Bertram. At this moment, however, Helen firmly believes that she loves hopelessly: he is as far away from her as a "star" is from humans, because of his social class and noble birth.

Despite Helen's pessimism, she still cannot rid herself of her passion. Instead, she tells us, "There is no living...If Bertram be away." This statement will remain true as the play continues--Helen simply cannot bear to be away from Bertram, and will follow him, no matter the cost.

These opposing emotions create a consistent sense of conflict within Helen. She assumes that she does not deserve Bertram, yet cannot help but love him. The characters around Helen (and the audience) take quite a different attitude, however: to them, it is the proud and shallow Bertram who is unworthy of Helen's love.

Parolles:
Are you meditating on virginity?

Helen:
Ay. You have some stain of soldier in you; let me ask you a question. Man is enemy to virginity. How may we barricado it against him?

Parolles:
Keep him out.

Helen:
But he assails, and our virginity, though valiant in the defense, yet is weak. Unfold to us some warlike resistance.

Parolles:
There is none. Man setting down before you will undermine you and blow you up.

Helen:
Bless our poor virginity from underminers and blowers-up! Is there no military policy how virgins might blow up men?

Parolles:
Virginity being blown down, man will quicklier be blown up.

Related Characters: Helen, Parolles (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.115-129

Explanation and Analysis

After Helen's mournful speech about Bertram, her next dialogue with Parolles strikes a very different tone, as they banter about the subject of virginity. Although their retorts may seem simply bawdy and comic, they actually bring up a vital theme: the close connection, within *All's Well That Ends Well*, between love and war.

As Parolles and Helen discuss relations between men and women, they consistently use warlike metaphors to express themselves. In fact, they describe the entire act of losing one's virginity as a siege that ends only when (presumably female) virginity is at last "blown down."

Although she claims to be a meek and modest maiden, it is important to note that Helen is not shocked or frightened by Parolles' vulgar talk. Instead, she meets him on his own turf, challenging his wit with sharp replies of her own, and proving herself a master of metaphor and language.

Virginity, like an old courtier, wears her cap out of fashion, richly suited but unsuitable, just like the brooch and the toothpick, which wear not now. . . . And your virginity, your old virginity, is like one of our French withered pears: it looks ill, it eats dryly; marry, 'tis a withered pear. It was formerly better; marry, yet 'tis a withered pear. Will you anything with it?

Related Characters: Parolles (speaker), Helen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.161-170

Explanation and Analysis

As he continues his banter about virginity with Helen, Parolles launches into a long explanation of the definition of virginity. Trying to explain to Helen why maidens should attempt to lose their virginities, he explains that virginity is like "an old courtier" who is out of fashion. He then compares it to "a withered pear" that "looks ill" and is dry. Finally, he asks Helen why she wants to keep it.

In this speech, we see how contradictory the idea of virginity is in this play, and how obsessed the characters are with it. On one hand, characters like Parolles selfishly want women to give up their virginities. On the other hand, unmarried women who are not virgins are thought of as little better than prostitutes. For a poor, unmarried woman like Helen, the situation appears to be lose-lose.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

Countess:
Tell me thy reason why thou wilt marry.

Fool:
My poor body, madam, requires it. I am driven on by the flesh, and he must needs go that the devil drives.

Countess:
Is this all your Worship's reason?

Related Characters: The Countess of Rossillion, The Fool (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.28-32

Explanation and Analysis

In another comic interlude, the Countess, Bertram's mother, exchanges jokes with her fool as the two discuss the topic of marriage. The Fool, who claims that he means to marry, says that he will do so because his body "requires it"--basically, he wishes to marry in order to engage in sexual intercourse.

The Fool's retorts go against the generally accepted idea that marriage is a holy institution, driven by a combination of love and piety. His view, however joking, is not without merit: people in *All's Well*often enter into relationships for reasons other than love, and the connection between marriage and sex is both stronger and more complicated than the characters want to admit.

Pardon, madam.
The Count Rossillion cannot be my brother.
I am from humble, he from honored name;
No note upon my parents, his all noble.
My master, my dear lord he is, and I
His servant live and will his vassal die.
He must not be my brother.

Related Characters: Helen (speaker), Bertram

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.159-165

Explanation and Analysis

Helen converses with the Countess, who--secretly knowing of Helen's love for Bertram--calls herself Helen's "mother." Helen, however, reacts with violent dismay: she explains that however close she may be to the family, she could never refer to Bertram as her "brother."

At least on the surface, Helen claims that her upset comes from her own "humble" station. She thinks of Bertram as her "master" and her "lord." She is not his equal, and therefore could never be related to him. Her birth is too low and his too high for them to be a part of the same family.

Of course, on another level, Helen's immediate denial of a sibling relationship between herself and Bertram springs from her desperate romantic love for him. She shies away from thinking of him as her brother because that would make her love incestuous, and therefore even more sinful than she already believes it to be (since she yearns for one of higher birth than herself).

But think you, Helen,
If you should tender your supposed aid,
He would receive it? He and his physicians
Are of a mind: he that they cannot help him,
They that they cannot help. How shall they credit
A poor unlearned virgin, when the schools
Emboweled of their doctrine have left off
The danger to itself?

Related Characters: The Countess of Rossillion (speaker), Helen, The King of France

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.249-256

Explanation and Analysis

During her conversation with the Countess, Helen, a doctor's daughter, decides to travel to Paris and attempt to cure the King of his long, mysterious illness. The Countess, however, initially reacts with skepticism. She reminds Helen that everyone considers the king's condition hopeless, and that they are unlikely to change their minds based on the opinions of "a poor unlearned virgin."

The Countess's comment reveals the many obstacles that Helen faces in her quest for social advancement. First, she is poor and of low birth; although her father was a well-respected doctor, their family is not noble. Second, she is a young, unmarried woman, and therefore inhabits a very low status within this patriarchal society. Although the Countess's words are not discouraging, they are also not unwise: it is highly unlikely that the king and his counselors will trust someone like Helen, at least at first.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

Those girls of Italy, take heed of them.
They say our French lack language to deny
If they demand. Beware of being captives
Before you serve.

Related Characters: The King of France (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.21-24

Explanation and Analysis

The King of France is sending his lords to Italy, where they will aid in a war. Mixing language of love and war, he warns the noblemen not to fall in love with the "girls of Italy," who supposedly have great power over Frenchmen. He asserts that these women may take the lords captive and distract them from the war effort.

The King's language cements the connection between violence and sex that continually comes up throughout the play. Once again, love is compared to war. In this case, though, women are the aggressors, able to take unwitting men captive with their charms and wiles.

Lafew:
I have seen a medicine
That's able to breathe life into a stone,
Quicken a rock, and make you dance canary
With sprightly fire and motion, whose simple touch
Is powerful to araise King Pippen, nay,
To give great Charlemagne a pen in 's hand
And write to her a love line.

King:
What "her" is this?

Lafew:
Why, Doctor She. My lord, there's one arrived,
If you will see her. Now, by my faith and honor,
If seriously I may convey my thoughts
In this my light deliverance, 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. Will you see her—
For that is her demand—and know her business?
That done, laugh well at me.

King:
Now, good Lafew,
Bring in the admiration, that we with thee
May spend our wonder too, or take off thine
By wond'ring how thou took'st it.

Related Characters: Parolles, The King of France (speaker), Helen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.84-104

Explanation and Analysis

The high-ranking lord Lafew has decided to help Helen, and so makes her presence known to the King, telling him that there is a "Doctor She" who can even raise the dead, and who has amazed him with "her sex, her years...Wisdom, and constancy." Although Lafew can hardly believe what he is saying, the King responds positively, saying that he will meet with Helen either to wonder at her with Lafew, or to cure his friend of his (presumably falsely inspired) amazement.

The King and Lafew's surprise makes a great deal of sense, given the classist, sexist, hierarchical nature of their court. Young women like Helen were not supposed to have "wisdom" or learning, and yet she seems to possess a "medicine" so powerful that it could raise the King's famous ancestors. Despite their skepticism and the rigid hierarchies of their society, though, both men are open to the idea of seeing Helen, proof of their desperation, given the King's long illness.

Then shalt thou give me with thy kingly hand
What husband in thy power I will command.
Exempted be from me the arrogance
To choose from forth the royal blood of France,
My low and humble name to propagate
With any branch or image of thy state;
But such a one, thy vassal, whom I know
Is free for me to ask, thee to bestow.

Related Characters: Helen (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.214-221

Explanation and Analysis

With the King having consented to undergo Helen's treatment, he asks her how he can reward her if her cure is successful. It is here that Helen's true ambition is finally revealed: she asks that she may pick whatever husband she desires from one of the noblemen of France.

Helen's tactics here are incredibly complex and astute. It is a daring thing for any woman in this society—let alone a lowborn one like Helen—to ask to choose her own husband. Additionally we, the audience, know that she has one specific noble husband in mind: Bertram.

Even as she makes her audacious request, though, Helen maintains her language of humility and submissiveness. She makes clear to the King that it will be a display of power for *him* to "bestow" one of his "vassal[s]" on someone as unworthy as she is. She repeatedly reminds the King how "low and humble" she is, and asks him to pardon her from "the arrogance" of her wish.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

'Tis only title thou disdain'st in her, the which
I can build up. Strange is it that our bloods,
Of colour, weight, and heat, pour'd all together,
Would quite confound distinction, yet stand off
In differences so mighty. If she be
All that is virtuous, save what thou dislikest,
A poor physician's daughter, thou dislikest
Of virtue for the name: but do not so:
From lowest place when virtuous things proceed,
The place is dignified by the doer's deed:
Where great additions swell's, and virtue none,
It is a dropsied honour. Good alone
Is good without a name. Vileness is so:
The property by what it is should go,
Not by the title. She is young, wise, fair;
In these to nature she's immediate heir,
And these breed honour: that is honour's scorn,
Which challenges itself as honour's born
And is not like the sire: honours thrive,
When rather from our acts we them derive
Than our foregoers: the mere word's a slave
Debosh'd on every tomb, on every grave
A lying trophy, and as oft is dumb
Where dust and damn'd oblivion is the tomb
Of honour'd bones indeed. What should be said?
If thou canst like this creature as a maid,
I can create the rest: virtue and she
Is her own dower; honour and wealth from me.

Related Characters: The King of France (speaker), Bertram, Helen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.3.128-155

Explanation and Analysis

After being chosen by Helen, Bertram is furious, stating that he can never love her. The King, however, convinced of Helen's worthiness, grows angry with Bertram. In a long tirade, he explains that Bertram "distain'st" only Helen's lack of title and wealth, which he, as the King, can fix. He goes on to praise Helen's virtue, attempting to explain to Bertram the value of that attribute. He continues by asserting that Helena is rich in those qualities that only nature can bestow: "She is young, wise, and fair." He ends by telling Bertram that "scorn" is not an honorable emotion, and reminds the young lord that he can give Helen "honour and wealth," while only she herself can provide virtue and beauty.

The King's speech is a complex one, revealing the complex nature of class within this society. Although Helen is lowborn, the King recognizes her noble qualities, and wishes to reward her with wealth and a title to match. Bertram, however, cannot see past Helen's low birth; he is moved only by the King's power and veiled threats, not by the logical argument that he hears proposed.

This passage also reveals the transactional nature of marriage in this society. The King firmly believes that beauty, wealth, and equality of birth are enough to make a happy marriage. Further, he believes that Bertram should marry whomever he, the King, commands. This view even further complicates the already thorny subject of marriage within the play.

I did think thee, for two ordinaries, to be a pretty wise fellow; thou didst make tolerable vent of thy travel; it might pass. Yet the scarves and the bannerets about thee did manifoldly dissuade me from believing thee a vessel of too great a burden. I have now found thee. When I lose thee again, I care not. Yet art thou good for nothing but taking up, and that thou'rt scarce worth.

Related Characters: Lafew (speaker), Parolles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.3.215-222

Explanation and Analysis

Lafew, the dignified courtier, meets Parolles, Bertram's undignified, dishonest, and vain manservant. The two take an instant dislike to each other, and immediately begin to trade insults. Here, Lafew takes aim at Parolles' fondness for flamboyant clothing, especially "scarves." Sarcastically, Lafew tells Parolles that he believed him to be "a pretty wise fellow," but subsequently mocks his various adornments, calling him worthless and utterly dismissing him.

Although Lafew may seem somewhat stuffy, he also happens to be correct: Parolles is generally treacherous and two-faced. He will do or say anything if it is advantageous to him, and he has seemingly no sense of loyalty or morality.

To th' wars, my boy, to th' wars!
He wears his honor in a box unseen
That hugs his kicky-wicky here at home,
Spending his manly marrow in her arms
Which should sustain the bound and high curvet
Of Mars's fiery steed. To other regions!
France is a stable, we that dwell in 't jades.
Therefore, to th' war!

Related Characters: Parolles (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.3.294-301

Explanation and Analysis

Bertram has just informed Parolles that rather than stay with his new wife, he will escape to the wars in Italy. The fickle Parolles thinks that this is an excellent plan, even though it goes against the direct wishes of the King. Parolles begins to tell Bertram about the honor of going to war, and scorns men who choose to stay at home out of love or sexual desire for women.

This speech is mostly ironic, of course, as it comes from the cowardly Parolles. Although he claims to wish to participate in the bravery of the battlefield, he is in fact out to save his own skin, and nothing else. Parolles is merely telling the shallow Bertram what he wants to hear, rather than voicing a valid or informed opinion. He also again displays a contempt for women, viewing them as objects to be conquered and left behind, rather than as people in their own right.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

Fare you well, my lord, and believe this of me: there can be no kernel in this light nut. The soul of this man is his clothes. Trust him not in matter of heavy consequence.

Related Characters: Lafew (speaker), Bertram, Parolles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.5.43-46

Explanation and Analysis

As Bertram and Parolles prepare to go, Lafew urges the younger man not to trust his servant. By saying that Parolles is a "nut" without a "kernel," Lafew means to express that Parolles has no core sense of morality or character, and cannot be counted upon. Instead, Parolles is wholly shallow--his "soul...is his clothes." Like clothes, Parolles can change himself at will, shifting his identity, his views, and his allegiances based on what will be most advantageous to him.

Lafew's warning, while astute, goes unheeded by Bertram. This theme of refusing to listen to sound advice is a common one in *All's Well That Ends Well*, especially when it comes to Bertram. Just as he refused to be convinced of Helen's worth by the King, so too does he refuse to believe in Parolles' faithlessness.

Sir, I can nothing say
But that I am your most obedient servant.

Related Characters: Helen (speaker), Bertram

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.5.77-78

Explanation and Analysis

As Bertram prepares to leave, a dismayed Helen comes to watch him depart. Although they are man and wife, they have not consummated their relationship, and it is plain to Helen that her husband is determined to leave her. That said, she does not attempt to stop him. Instead, she only reminds him that she is his "most obedient servant" and that she will do whatever he says.

Once again, we witness the complexity of Helen. Despite being a strong and independent female character, she also appears completely submissive to her careless and cruel husband. In other words, she is determined to be the perfect wife, no matter how badly Bertram may treat her. This submission is born both from the societal expectations that wives be docile and obedient, and also from Helen's deep love for Bertram, and her desire to please him no matter what.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

I have sent you a daughter-in-law. She hath recovered the King and undone me. I have wedded her, not bedded her, and sworn to make the "not" eternal.

Related Characters: Bertram (speaker), The Countess of Rossillion, Helen, The King of France

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.19-22

Explanation and Analysis

Helen travels back to Rossillion to the countess, where she gives her new mother-in-law a letter from Bertram. Within it, he explains that Helen has cured the King, but that he considers himself "undone" by their marriage. He goes on to say that while they are married, he has not slept with his wife, and intends never to do so.

This note reveals the cruelty and shallowness behind the noble Bertram. Although he may be highborn, handsome, and brave, he acts callously towards Helen, the woman who loves him most in the world, and even goes so far as to deceive her in order to get what he wants. Further, he even ridicules her to the Countess, who loves Helen as much as (or even more than) her own child.

It is also notable how obsessed Bertram is with the idea of sex as it relates to marriage. As long as Helen remains a virgin, Bertram believes, they are not truly man and wife. This idea will come back to haunt him as the play continues.

❝ When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband. But in such a "then" I write a "never."

Related Characters: Bertram (speaker), Helen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.2.58-62

Explanation and Analysis

Here Helen reads aloud a letter from Bertram, in which he tells her that they will only be married when she can get "the ring upon my finger," and prove that she is pregnant with his child. To Bertram, of course, these requirements seem like impossibilities. As far as he is concerned, he will never give Helen a ring (implying his loyalty to and love for her), nor will he ever sleep with her, making a child out of the question.

Helen, however, takes the letter in a different way. After all, she has already cured the King of a deadly illness and married a man considered far above her in terms of wealth and nobility; it makes sense that she would believe Bertram's requirements to be merely difficult, but not impossible, tasks. This difference in understanding highlights the gap between Bertram's shallow arrogance and Helen's determined, can-do attitude.

At the same time, this passage also underlines Bertram's equation of sex, marriage, and love. He believes that his marriage to Helen will never be real unless they consummate it--and so Helen decides to challenge him on his own terms.

Act 3, Scene 5 Quotes

❝ I know that knave, hang him! One Parolles, a filthy officer he is in those suggestions for the young earl. –Beware of them, Diana. Their promises, enticements, oaths, tokens, and all these enginges of lust are not the things they go under. 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 threatens them. I hope I need not to advise you further; but I hope your own grace will keep you where you are, though there were no further danger known but the modesty which is so lost.

Related Characters: Mariana (speaker), Parolles, Bertram

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.5.17-29

Explanation and Analysis

The Italian women, along with a disguised Helen, watch the French soldiers process into their city. One of the women is Diana, the brand-new object of Bertram's affections. As Parolles goes by, Diana's friend, Mariana, speaks her mind, voicing how much she hates Parolles, and how she believes that he has corrupted Bertram.

Mariana's tirade continues, encompassing her feelings about men in general. She believes that men can promise and entice a maiden only to take her virginity, leave her, and ruin her. In short, her view is that all men are deceitful, immoral, and immune to the consequences of their actions, and so the best thing a young woman can do is to stay far away from them.

In Mariana's rant the somewhat-secret war between men and women within *All's Well That Ends Well*becomes fully apparent. Men believe that women are tricksters who use their wiles to seduce and manipulate men. Women, meanwhile, believe that men are destructive liars, who care only about "conquering" a woman and are happy to leave her high and dry afterwards. In short, each sex thinks the worst of the other.

Act 3, Scene 6 Quotes

Bertram:
Do you believe I am so far deceived in him?

Lord:
Believe it, my lord. In mine own direct knowledge, without any malice, but to speak of him as my kinsman, he's a most notable coward, an infinite and endless liar, an hourly promise-breaker, the owner of no one good quality worthy your Lordship's entertainment.

Related Characters: Bertram (speaker), Parolles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.6.6-12

Explanation and Analysis

Back in the French military camp, a group of lords tries to convince Bertram that Parolles is dishonest and corrupt. Bertram is disbelieving, though one of the lords urges him on, telling him that Parolles is a "coward," a "liar," a "promise-breaker," and in short has not "one good quality."

As happens so often in *All's Well that Ends Well*, a net of treachery and deceit has sprung up among several different characters. Parolles has fooled Bertram into thinking him a good and faithful friend. The lords are now undercutting Parolles by talking behind his back to Bertram. And soon Bertram, with the help of the lords, will take revenge on Parolles--but only through further trickery and deceit. This type of tangled interaction is common for *All's Well*, where seemingly everyone--even the most well-meaning of characters--has the capacity for deceit.

Act 3, Scene 7 Quotes

Helen:
The Count he woos your daughter;
Lays down his wanton siege before her beauty,
Resolved to carry her. Let her in fine consent
As we'll direct her how 'tis best to bear it.
Now his important blood will naught deny
That she'll demand. A ring the County wears
That downward hath succeeded in his house
From son to son some four or five descents
Since the first father wore it. This ring he holds
In most rich choice. Yet, in his idle fire,
To buy his will it would not seem too dear,
Howe'er repented after.

Widow:
Now I see the bottom of your purpose.

Helen:
You see it lawful, then. It is no more
But that your daughter, ere she seems as won,
Desires this ring, appoints him an encounter,
In fine, delivers me to fill the time,
Herself most chastely absent.

Related Characters: Helen, The Widow (speaker), Bertram, Diana

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.7.20-38

Explanation and Analysis

Back at the Widow's home, Helen reveals herself as Bertram's scorned wife. Rather than hating Diana for having attracted Bertram's attention, Helen instead has a much craftier plan: she will use Bertram's attraction to Diana in order to gain both his ring and his child, fooling him into thinking that he is pledging his love to and sleeping with Diana, when in fact Helen has taken her place.

This passage yet again shows the complexity of Helen's thinking. She does not hate Diana, but instead views the other woman as a means by which she can eventually be reunited with her husband (and fulfill his previous, seemingly impossible demands). She assures the Widow that Bertram will give the ring to Diana, despite his noble blood and the ring's importance to his family, knowing all too well that her faithless husband is driven by his desire rather than his judgment.

Helen also tells both the Widow and the audience that her plot, which will culminate in Bertram sleeping with and impregnating her, is "lawful," because she is in fact Bertram's wife. Deceit and trickery, in Helen's mind, are utterly justified when they are carried out on behalf of the "lawful" bonds of matrimony.

Act 4, Scene 2 Quotes

Mine honor's such a ring.
My chastity's the jewel of our house,
Bequeathed down from many ancestors,
Which were the greatest obloquy i' the' world
In me to lose. Thus your own proper wisdom
Brings in the champion honor on my part
Against your vain assault.

Related Characters: Diana (speaker), Bertram

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4.2.55-61

Explanation and Analysis

Now a willing participant in Helen's plan, Diana pretends to flirtatiously banter with Bertram. She promises to offer him her virginity, but will only do so (she says) if he gives her his ancient and valuable ring. When he protests, she explains that her "honor" and "chastity" are the only "jewl" that her family has. In short, if he cannot give her the ring, she cannot give him her virginity.

This passage makes clear Diana's own cleverness, but once again makes clear the transactional way that all the characters think about both love and sex. Bertram and Diana are essentially bartering, each trying to gain advantage over the other. At the same time, Diana appears to have bought into the idea that women's worth is tied into their reproductive value: a valuable married woman bears children, while a valuable unmarried woman is necessarily a virgin. Still, Diana uses the system against Bertram in this case, making clear that he must give her a priceless jewel in exchange for her equally priceless virginity.

Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

Upon his many protestations to marry me when his wife was dead, I blush to say it, he won me. Now is the Count Rossillion a widower, his vows are forfeited to me and my honor's paid to him. He stole from Florence, taking no leave, and I follow him to his country for justice. Grant it me, O king. In you it best lies. Otherwise a seducer flourishes, and a poor maid is undone.

Related Characters: Diana (speaker), Bertram, Helen

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 5.3.159-166

Explanation and Analysis

As Helen's plot continues to unfold, Diana and her mother appear before the King, and accuse Bertram: they say that he promised to marry her, took her virginity, and abandoned her. Here Diana describes how Bertram supposedly fooled her into giving up her honor, only to leave without her knowledge. She pleads for justice, and asks for Bertram to be punished.

This is a complex speech, full of both pathos and irony. On one hand, Bertram does indeed think that he committed all these crimes (and is now denying it). On the other hand, the woman he actually slept with is not Diana, but Helen, his "lawful" wife. Essentially, Diana and Helen have banded together both to reunite Helen with Bertram (however unwilling he may be) and to punish him for his deceitful, unfaithful behavior.

As is standard for *All's Well*, Diana also takes care to portray Bertram as the aggressor, and herself as the conquered victim. Once again, love and war come together, highlighting both traditional gender roles (and their sometimes-comic reversals) and the characters' individual views on the subject.

I wonder, sir, since wives are monsters to you
And that you fly them as you swear them lordship,
Yet you desire to marry.

Related Characters: The King of France (speaker), Bertram

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.3.176-178

Explanation and Analysis

Furious with Bertram, the King questions why Bertram wished to marry Lafew's daughter, since he has now (supposedly) promised to marry two women (Helen and Diana), only to abandon them.

The King has in fact astutely pointed out a pattern in Bertram's behavior: his consistent mistreatment of women, and his belief that he is entitled to do what he likes with them simply because he is a man.

The King believes that these actions make Bertram ignoble and unworthy of marrying anyone. In fact, however, they are more or less standard in a society that treats women like property, valuing them only for their virginities and childbearing potential. Although Bertram is cruel and careless, he is also a product of the patriarchal society in which he has been brought up.

> If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly,
> I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly.

Related Characters: Bertram (speaker), Helen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.3.360-361

Explanation and Analysis

At last, with her plot complete, Helen emerges. Not only is she alive (to the surprise of all but the Widow and Diana), but she is also in possession of Bertram's ring, and pregnant with his child. The entire court is shocked by this apparent miracle, but none more so than Bertram, who has been fooled into sleeping with his own wife (an act in which he vowed never to engage).

In proving that Bertram has taken her virginity and impregnated her, Helen has essentially proved the validity of their marriage to all--including Bertram himself. She has tied herself to him forever, and has proven that their lawful connection is a physical one as well. In short, she has used society's obsession with sex, marriage, and virginity to get exactly what she wanted: the man of her dreams.

Of course, Helen has also done so through a great deal of deceit--but Bertram now seems past caring. At this point in the plot, he wishes only for understanding and resolution, and so vows to "love" his formerly hated wife "dearly" if she will explain to him how these events came to pass. Although this resolution may seem weak and suspect, it is the best that the characters of the dark and complex *All's Well*can manage.

> If thou be'st yet a fresh uncropped flower,
> Choose thou thy husband, and I'll pay thy dower.
> For I can guess that by thy honest aid
> Thou kept'st a wife herself, thyself a maid.
> Of that and all the progress more and less,
> Resolvedly more leisure shall express.
> All yet seems well, and if it end so meet,
> The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet.

Related Characters: The King of France (speaker), Diana

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.3.372-379

Explanation and Analysis

Amazed and happy that Helen is alive, the King now turns to Diana. He tells her that (as he did with Helen), he will allow her to choose any husband she wants, and will make her a wealthy woman by "pay[ing] her dower." However, he will only do so if she is indeed still "a maid." The King's promise shows that, despite the complications that ensued after he made the same promise to Helen, he is willing to do the same thing all over again. HIs qualification that he will only do so if Diana is a maid, meanwhile, displays his society's continuing obsession with virginity (and female virginity in particular).

The King goes on, saying that "All...seems well" in his kingdom, and that though the past may be "bitter" it only makes the ending of the play more "sweet." This type of happy resolution is common for a comedy, yet in the case of *All's Well*, it seems somewhat jarring. The "past" has indeed been very "bitter," and the seemingly unworthy Bertram has ended up with the brave, loyal Helen. Although the King may tell us one thing, it is up to the audience to determine whether we really believe the happy ending occurring in front of us, and accept the play's title without reservations.

Epilogue Quotes

> All is well ended if this suit be won,
> That you express content, which we will pay,
> With strift to please you, day exceeding day.

Related Characters: The King of France (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: Ep.2-4

Explanation and Analysis

The King reemerges for the Epilogue, telling the audience once more that "All is well ended," but only if the play has pleased the audience. This meta-theatrical speech reveals the true significance of the comic resolution: it does not matter if the characters are truly "happy," so long as the audience is.

By breaking the "fourth wall" (the divide between play and audience) in this way, Shakespeare is reminding the audience of the artificiality of what they've just seen, and emphasizing that it has all taken place for their entertainment. The true meaning of "ending well" is a satisfied audience--and it is for this ending that actors and playwrights will continue to strive, "day exceeding day."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Bertram, the young count of Rossillion, is preparing to leave to go to the king of France, whose ward he will be because his own father has recently passed away. His mother, the countess of Rossillion, is sad to see her son leave. A nobleman named Lafew says that the king will be like a father to Bertram and a husband to the Countess. However, the king is very ill, and has given up all hope of recovering.

The play opens with a set of problems that seem difficult to resolve: Bertram has no father and must leave his mother, while the king is so ill that he has no hope of recovery. By the end of the play, though, all these issues will be fixed—or, at least, will seem to be fixed.

The countess mentions that a young woman under her care had a father who was such a skilled doctor that he "would have made nature immortal," and likely could have cured the king. Sadly, this doctor is dead. Lafew says that the king has mentioned this doctor before, and tells the countess that the king is suffering from a kind of ulcer called a fistula. He asks about the doctor's daughter, who the Countess says is now under her care and is both honest and good.

The doctor's medicines are a literal version of the "remedies" that are needed for other problems in the play. Both kinds of remedy seem to be out of the characters' reach. The countess considers the doctor's daughter to be a good, honest person, considering her virtue and character and disregarding her class.

The doctor's daughter, named Helen, is crying while the countess and Lafew talk, and the countess tells Helen to restrain her sorrow over her father's death, so that she does not appear to be affecting more grief than she really feels. Lafew agrees, suggesting the importance of "moderate lamentation."

Helen's crying contributes to the overwhelming sense of sadness and pessimism with which the play begins, and which will be in great contrast to its happy ending.

The countess bids farewell to her son, and gives Bertram some motherly advice to be virtuous, careful, and honest. She leaves, and after Lafew says goodbye to Helen, he leaves with Bertram. All alone, Helen reveals that her tears are not over her father, but over Bertram, with whom she is hopelessly in love. She compares Bertram to a star so far above her that she cannot reach, and laments that she is in love with someone so far above her social class.

While Helen did not necessarily lie to the countess, she has hidden the real reason for her tears. Social class is such an important matter in this world, that Helen thinks her love for Bertram is not merely difficult but impossible to pursue.

Bertram's friend Parolles enters. Helen says to herself that she knows Parolles to be "a great way fool, solely a coward," but she must be nice to him because he is close to Bertram. Parolles asks if Helen is "meditating on virginity." Helen answers that she is, and says that "man is enemy to virginity." She asks how women may preserve their virginity against men, and she and Parolles tease each other with some sexual wordplay, comparing wooing men to soldiers laying siege to a city.

Helen already has a good idea of what Parolles' character precisely is. Helen begins the conversation by adhering to traditional notions of virginity, suggesting the importance of women maintaining their chastity. The wordplay comparing love to war mixes up traditionally male (war) and female (love) spheres.

Parolles opines that virginity is "too cold a companion," and says that women should try to lose it. Helen disagrees, and Parolles speaks further against virginity. He says that to uphold virginity is to disrespect one's mother (since a mother has necessarily had sex). He also says that the longer virginity is kept, the less precious it is, and compares "old virginity" to "one of our French withered pears: / it looks ill, it eats dryly."

Parolles argues against traditional ideas about virginity, seeing sex as a natural bodily function, and chastity and prolonged virginity as a bad, even unnatural thing. Of course, his views may also simply be self-serving.

Helen remains insistent that she will maintain her virginity, and then speaks of Bertram. She compliments him and hopes that he will do well in the royal court. She laments that all she can do is wish Bertram well. A page enters and tells Parolles that Bertram is calling for him. Before Parolles leaves, he and Helen trade some quips about what astrological sign he was born under.

Helen remains firm in her devotion to her own virginity, and thereby upholds a traditional female role of thwarting male sexual advances.

Helen jokes that Parolles must have been born when Mars was in retrograde (moving in reverse), because he flees and runs away in war. Parolles tells her to find herself a husband, and then leaves. Alone again, Helen thinks of her hopeless situation with Bertram. But then she comes up with an idea: she says that the king's sickness may offer her a possible strategy.

Helen pokes fun at Parolles' cowardice, which contradicts the stereotypically male bravery Parolles tries to display. Parolles thinks the only worthwhile thing Helen can do as a woman is finding a husband. Helen begins to form a strategy for resolving her seemingly impossible problem.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

At the royal court, the king decides not to interfere in a dispute between the Italian cities of Siena and Florence. However, he says that any French gentlemen who wants to go and join the fight are free to do so, on either side they wish. Bertram, Lafew, and Parolles then arrive from Rossillion, and the king remarks on how much Bertram resembles his late father, an old friend of his. He wishes he had the "corporeal soundness" he and Bertram's father both had in their youth, but laments that "haggish age" wore both of them down.

The king's first appearance in the play is filled with sadness and pessimism. He has lost all hope of recovering from his illness, takes no interest in foreign affairs, and laments his feeble old age. Later in the play, the king will undergo a striking shift and become optimistic, urging his fellow characters to move toward a happy, comic ending.

The king describes the wit, honor, and virtue of Bertram's father, and says that the current generation cannot live up to his example. The king then suddenly wishes he were dead like Bertram's father. He remembers how the late count used to say that he didn't want to live "after my flame lacks oil," and wishes that he would die, since he is now ill and weak. He asks Bertram about the famous physician of Rossillion (Helen's father), who died six months ago. He says that if this doctor were still alive, he would perhaps be able to cure him. He welcomes Bertram to the royal court.

The king expresses a definite estimation of the innate character of Bertram's father. Again, the king is severely pessimistic and has no hope of getting better. The absence of Helen's doctor, with his miraculous ability to heal, suggests that all hope of remedy and resolution is gone, and out of the realm of possibility now. But all this will soon change.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Back at Rossillion, the countess asks a steward about Helen. She sees that a fool (a servant whose job is to entertain the court) is listening in, and tells him to leave. The fool says that he wants to get married to a woman because his "poor body . . . requires it," and he has to satisfy his sexual drives. The countess asks if this is his only reason for wanting to marry, and he says that he also wants to marry to repent for his wicked ways.

The fool's coarse jokes paint marriage less as a romantic ideal and more as a necessary hurdle on the way to satisfying sexual urges. The countess asks the steward about Helen in order to form a more accurate understanding of her character.

The fool talks at length about how he wants to have friends for his wife's sake, and how he would not mind if his wife cheated on him with his friends. He reasons that his wife is his flesh and blood, and so whoever loves his wife loves him, and is his friend. Tired of the fool's coarse jokes, the countess tells him to leave and tell Helen that she wants to speak to her. On his way out, the fool sings a song about Helen of Troy and hints that most women are unfaithful to their men. Frustrated, the countess again orders him to leave, and he finally does.

The fool's remarks differ greatly from societal ideals about marriage, faithfulness, and sex, suggesting that they are just that—ideals, which don't always match up to everyday realities. The fool is able to get a small form of revenge against his social superiors such as the countess by cleverly teasing and joking with them.

The steward and the countess discuss Helen, and the steward reveals that he has overheard Helen talking of her love for Bertram, and her sadness at there being "such difference betwixt their two estates." The countess says that she had often suspected Helen loved Bertram, and thanks the steward for sharing this information. She tells him to leave, and he departs just as Helen arrives. Speaking to herself, the countess says that she was similarly taken with "love's strong passion" when she was young, and says that she can tell Helen is in love by looking at her.

The countess is fond of Helen and still it is somewhat remarkable that she is not upset that Helen, of a significantly lower social class, is in love with her son. She sees "love's strong passion" as a natural part of youth and knows that it cannot always be fit into the strict structures of social propriety.

Helen greets the countess, and the countess tells her that she is like a mother to her. Helen is troubled at this (since this would make Bertram like her brother), and the countess asks why she looked so uncomfortable when she heard the word "mother." Helen says that she wishes the countess were her mother, but that it cannot be, since she is from such a humble background. The countess notes again that Helen goes pale at the mention of her being the countess' daughter, and says that she thinks Helen loves Bertram. She asks if this is true.

The countess now plays a bit of a deceptive trick on Helen, acting as if she doesn't already know about Helen's love for Bertram. Helen is very conscious of the gap between her social class and that of the countess, using it as a (very plausible) explanation of why she seems uncomfortable at the countess calling Helen her daughter.

Helen begs the countess' pardon, and finally admits that she does love Bertram. She asks the countess not to be offended, and says that she would not pursue Bertram until she is deserving of his high social status, though she does not know how she could possibly rise to his social level. She again asks the countess not to be upset that she loves Bertram.

Differences in social class are of such importance that Helen apologizes for even being in love with Bertram, and not even acting on this feeling. She sees the social hierarchy as something rigidly entrenched and unchangeable.

The countess asks Helen if she has lately been planning to go to Paris, to the royal court. Helen admits she has been planning this, and says that her father has left her "some prescriptions / Of rare and proved effects," which she thinks may be able to help cure the king. She admits, though, that her real motive in going to Paris would be to see Bertram. The countess wonders if the king would even try Helen's medicines, as she is only "a poor unlearned virgin."

Helen's medicines can be seen as representing the easy cures and remedies that come to solve many of the play's problems. The countess knows that the king will probably underestimate Helen and make a judgment of her based solely on her gender, reflecting widespread assumptions about gender roles.

Helen says that the medicines were made by her father, the famous doctor, and she is confident they could help the king, if she were given the chance to go to Paris. She asks the countess' permission to go, and the countess give her permission. She tells Helen that she will pray for God's blessing on Helen's attempt to cure the king, and will help Helen as much as she can.

Helen defies traditional female roles, deciding to take an active role in settling her issues and attempting to cure the king when all his (male) doctors have failed. The countess supports Helen and does not seem to look down on her because of her lower social standing.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Back at the royal court, the king of France bids farewell to some noblemen who are leaving to fight in the war in Italy. He tells them that he will likely be dead by the time they return, and encourages them to be honorable Frenchmen. He also warns them not to fall in love with any Italian women while they are fighting there. Parolles and Bertram enter and speak to the departing noblemen. Bertram is upset that the king is not allowing him to go to Italy and fight, because he is too young.

The king of France urges his noblemen to uphold especially masculine ideals of bravery and honor. Ironically, he simultaneously treats noble character as something natural (in urging his men to show their noble French heritage) and as something changeable, since his advice relies upon the possibility that his men can be encouraged to act more nobly and honorably.

Bertram and Parolles say goodbye to the noblemen, and Parolles tells them to give his greetings to an Italian soldier he wounded in battle, bragging about his feats in battle. The noblemen leave, and then Parolles encourages Bertram to go give them "a more dilated farewell." They both leave, and Lafew comes to speak to the king.

Parolles tries to project an image of himself as a brave, masculine soldier. This is a lie, though, as his true character is that of a coward. Bertram will only discover Parolles' real character later, and currently trusts Parolles as a noble friend.

Lafew asks the king if he will try any remedies for his illness, and the king refuses. Lafew tells him that a "Doctor She" has arrived at the court with medicines that could "breathe life into a stone." He asks the king to see the young female doctor, and he agrees, if only to marvel at the boldness of the young girl. Helen enters and Lafew leaves the king and her alone.

The king is stubborn in his belief that there is no cure for his illness. He and Lafew see Helen as merely an object of curiosity and amazement, and don't take her seriously as a doctor, underestimating her because of their sexist assumptions about women.

Helen tells the king who her father was, and the king says that he knew of her father, the famous doctor. Helen says that her father left her some powerful medicines and she thinks that one of them may help heal the king. The king thanks for her good intentions, but tells Helen that he is doubtful she can heal him, when all the "most learned doctors" of the court have failed.

The king continues to underestimate Helen based mostly on her gender. He still thinks that his illness is beyond cure, in the same way that all the play's various problems (like Helen's love for Bertram) are at this point not only unresolved but seem irresolvable.

Helen says she will not force the medicine on the king, and the king again thanks her for her thoughts of helping him, but tells her that he knows he is too ill, and she knows "no art" of medicine to help him. Helen says that it won't hurt the king to try her medicine, and tells him that God often works miracles through "the weakest minister." The king still refuses her treatment, and Helen assures him of her skill with her father's medicine. She tells him to "make an experiment" and see if God will heal him through her.

The king arrogantly claims to know that Helen has no medical knowledge, based on the fact that she is a woman. Helen tries to persuade the king by appealing to the idea of a divine miracle, the ultimate remedy that could solve any problem.

The king asks Helen how quickly she thinks she can heal him, and she answers that he will be healed within two days. He is surprised at her confidence, and asks what she is willing to wage on her promise to cure him. Helen tells him, if her medicines fail, "let my life be ended." The king is impressed with Helen and agrees to try her medicine. She asks what she will get as a reward if she cures him, and he asks what she wants. She suggests that if she is successful, she should have her choice of any man of the king's court to marry. The king agrees, and they both leave to begin treating his illness.

The king is surprised at Helen's confidence and boldness, which defy the typically submissive, demure role that Renaissance society assigned to women. Helen cleverly uses this opportunity to give her a chance at marrying Bertram. In reality, marriage can be just as much a matter of strategy and scheming as of love.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

At Rossillion, the countess orders the fool to bear a letter to the royal court. The fool speaks contemptuously of the court, and the countess asks him why he seems not to respect it. The fool tells her he has an answer for all questions, and launches into some witty wordplay, annoying the countess. The fool continues to tease the countess with wordplay and jokes, until the countess stops him and gives him a letter to deliver to Helen. She tells him to send her greetings to her son while he is at the royal court, and hurries him away.

The fool again uses his clever wit and jokes to get back at his social superiors in a small way, as they constantly order him around. In the end, though, he does carry out the countess' orders.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

At the king's court, Parolles, Bertram, and Lafew discuss the miracle of the king's recovery. Lafew remarks on how all the "learned and authentic fellows" had given up any hope of the king getting better. They agree that the miraculous healing is the work of the "very hand of heaven," acting through the weak "minister" of Helen. The king then enters with Helen, and he tells her that he is ready to give her the reward she was promised.

The king's seemingly incurable illness has found a rather quick remedy. Helen has proven the king's assumptions about her capabilities as a woman to be ill-founded. The male characters, though, refuse to give Helen credit for her behavior, seeing the cure as God acting through Helen.

The king has all his noblemen line up and tells Helen to make her choice. Helen speaks to the noblemen and tells them all that she is "a simple maid," and worries that they will refuse her love. The king tells her to choose whomever she wants, and tells her that whoever "shuns thy love shuns all his love in me." Helen speaks to several lords and then finally settles on Bertram, saying "this is the man."

Helen flips gender roles by choosing her husband, instead of a man choosing a wife. She knows that her social status makes her a somewhat undesirable wife, but the king uses his powerful position at the top of the social ladder to give her the ability to choose a husband above her class.

Bertram is immediately upset, and does not want to marry Helen. The king tells him that Helen has "raised" him from his "sickly bed," and demands that he marry her. Bertram protests that this is unfair, and the king says that he only detests Helen's "title." The king tells Bertram that "from lowest place whence virtuous things proceed, / The place is dignified by th' doer's deed." In other words, Helen's good deeds have raised and dignified her low social status.

Bertram reflects social norms in not wanting to marry beneath his social class. The king, on the other hand, argues that Helen's natural virtues outweigh her low social class and suggests that Bertram has formed an incorrect judgment of Helen's character.

The king even promises Bertram to supply Helen's dowry from his own wealth, but Bertram is stubborn, and says that he "cannot love her." The king gets angry and says that his "honor's at the stake," if he cannot follow through on his promise to Helen. He tells Bertram, "check thy contempt; / Obey our will," and says that Bertram misjudges Helen. Bertram finally relents and takes Helen's hand. The king says that they will be married this very night. Everyone but Parolles and Lafew leaves.

Bertram's situation turns normal gender dynamics around. Usually it is a woman in such a society who can be forced into marrying someone she doesn't love. The king again tells Bertram that he has wrongly judged Helen's character (something he himself was guilty of earlier). Bertram says that he has changed his mind, but we will soon see that this was a lie.

Lafew tells Parolles, "Your lord and master did well to make his recantation," and Parolles takes offense at Bertram being referred to as his master. Parolles says he'd challenge Lafew to a duel, but Lafew is too old. Lafew says that Parolles is "good for nothing" and makes fun of him for his elaborate scarves. Lafew leaves and Parolles speaks angrily about how he will beat the old man. Lafew returns and announces that Bertram and Helen have been married.

While Bertram is of a higher class than Parolles, Parolles takes offense at the notion that he is like a servant with Bertram as his master. Lafew immediately sees through Parolles' posturing to his real character. The marriage between Bertram and Helen—which earlier seemed an impossibility—has been carried out with relatively little difficulty.

Lafew and Parolles continue to trade angry quips, and Lafew again makes fun of Parolles' flamboyant appearance. He calls him a knave and leaves. A very distraught Bertram enters and tells Parolles that he will not sleep with Helen, even though he was forced to marry her. He plans to go to the wars in Italy so that he doesn't have to "bed her." Parolles agrees with this plan and speaks excitedly of going off "to th' war!"

Lafew makes fun of Parolles' outward appearance, which—like his bragging—covers up his real character. Having lied about changing his mind and agreeing to the marriage with Helen, Bertram actually has no plans of consummating the marriage with her. Parolles acts excited to go off to war, a place where he can display his supposed bravery.

Bertram says that he will send Helen to Rossillion to wait for him, but plans never to return there. Parolles asks if he is sure of this plan, and Bertram says he is. He plans to head to Italy tomorrow, and send Helen to Rossillion immediately. Parolles says that the king has wronged Bertram by forcing him into this marriage, and the two leave to make preparations for their journey to Italy.

Bertram plans to lie to Helen and trick her into going back to Rossillion to wait for him. But it is possible to see his deception as a response to Helen's own trickery, as she has to some degree tricked and forced him into marrying her.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Helen receives the countess' letter from the fool, and asks the fool whether the countess is well. The fool jokes that the countess is "not well, but yet she has her health." Parolles enters and the fool teases him with clever jokes. Ignoring the fool, Parolles tells Helen that Bertram is leaving for Italy, and must put off "the great prerogative and rite of love," (that is, consummating their marriage). Parolles says that Bertram wants Helen to leave the royal court immediately and return home, and she says that she will be obedient to her husband's will.

The fool's jokes insert some light comedy into the play and also allow him to snipe at his social superiors. For Helen and Bertram, sex is seen as the culmination and consummation of their marriage, and this is why Bertram wants to avoid it. This peculiar situation again reverses normal gender roles. As we see elsewhere in the play, it is stereotypically the man who urges sex and the woman who tries to delay or avoid it.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

As Bertram prepares to leave the royal court, Lafew warns him not to trust Parolles, but Bertram says that he believes Parolles is a valiant soldier. Parolles enters and informs Bertram that Helen will obey his wishes and leave for Rossillion immediately.

Bertram is confident in his (false) estimation of Parolles' character—just as the king thought he knew the extent of Helen's knowledge and abilities.

Bertram asks if there is any ill will between Parolles and Lafew. Parolles says he doesn't know what he has done to make Lafew dislike him, and Lafew says that Parolles has deliberately offended him. Bertram tells Lafew that he has misjudged Parolles' character. Lafew responds by again telling Bertram not to trust Parolles and then leaves.

Bertram tells Lafew that he has the wrong idea about Parolles, when ironically it is Bertram himself who has misjudged Parolles' character. Parolles has (so far) successfully deceived Bertram.

Helen enters and tells Bertram that she has made arrangements for her departure from the royal court. She says the king wants to speak with Bertram. Bertram apologizes for not fulfilling his husbandly duty on their wedding night, but says that he has good reason, and assures her that his "respects are better than they seem." Helen tells Bertram that she is his "most obedient servant." She asks for a kiss before they part, but Bertram says he's in too much of a hurry. Helen exits, and Bertram says that he will never go home to see her. He and Parolles leave.

Bertram plainly lies to Helen and pretends to be a dutiful husband. His true feelings are displayed when he neglects to kiss his new wife goodbye. Helen promises to fulfill the traditional role of a subservient wife, as Bertram's "most obedient servant." When she realizes his deception, though, she will take a much more active role in their relationship.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

The duke of Florence welcomes the French noblemen who have come from the king's court. He remarks that he is surprised the king of France has chosen not to involve himself in the war officially, but thanks the noblemen who have come for their help. He says that they will go to the battlefield tomorrow.

This scene encapsulates a stereotypically male sphere of experience, with noblemen bravely preparing for war. But for much of the play, brave noblemen like Parolles and Bertram are more concerned with petty tricks and romantic affairs than with battle.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

At Rossillion, the fool delivers a letter from Bertram to the countess. He says that Bertram appeared melancholy, and the countess opens the letter to see what is going on with him. The fool says that while he earlier wanted to marry a woman in the country, he has changed his mind because the women of the court were much more beautiful. The fool leaves, and the countess reads the letter, in which Bertram tells her that he has resolved never to sleep with Helen, and has run away from Rossillion for good. The countess says that his behavior is "not well" and that Bertram is a "rash and unbridled boy."

The fool continues to deflate lofty ideals of marriage, as he suggests that all he cares about in marriage is finding the most physically attractive woman he can. The countess does not share Bertram's dislike of Helen's low social class, and ends up being upset with her own son. His behavior causes her to reevaluate his character and conclude that he is a "rash and unbridled boy."

The fool returns and tells the countess that Bertram has run away. He says that Helen can tell her more, and leaves as Helen enters with a nobleman. The countess asks her what has happened, and the nobleman informs her that Bertram has gone to Florence. Helen shows the countess a letter from Bertram, in which he says that he will never consider himself her husband until she has gotten a **ring** of his off his finger and is bearing his child. He says that this will never happen.

Bertram's two conditions for Helen highlight two important aspects of marriage that, for him, would seal his union with her: first, the sharing of his ancestral wealth and social status, represented by the ring. And second, the consummation of sex, which Helen can prove by becoming pregnant.

The countess says that she is saddened by all this, and says she no longer considers Bertram to be her son. Helen reads more of Bertram's letter, in which he says, "Till I have no wife I have nothing in France." The countess asks who has gone to Italy with Bertram and upon learning that Parolles is with him, says that Parolles is "a very tainted fellow, and full of wickedness." Everyone but Helen leaves.

The countess knows what Parolles is really like, and worries that his bad character can negatively affect that of Bertram. Again, she is not bothered by Helen's low social status, and takes her side in the dispute with Bertram.

Alone, Helen decides that she will leave France. She worries that it is her fault that Bertram has been driven to go to war, where he is in danger. She thinks that if she leaves, he will be able to come home, where he will be safe. She plans to leave Rossillion as soon as she can.

Here, for a moment, Helen behaves like a traditional, submissive woman, as she prioritizes Bertram's happiness over her own and blames herself for his going to Italy.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

In Florence, the duke puts Bertram in charge of his cavalry. Bertram is honored and says that he will fight valiantly. He promises to be a lover of war and a "hater of love."

Bertram has an opportunity to show his masculine bravery in battle, and stop wasting his time on love affairs. But he won't be a "hater of love" for long.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Back at Rossillion, the countess finds a letter that Helen has left for her. In the letter, Helen tells the countess that she has left to become a pilgrim to the shrine of St. Jaques. She says that this will allow Bertram to return home, and calls Bertram "too good and fair" for her. The countess laments that she did not get a chance to dissuade Helen from leaving.

Helen's letter stresses Bertram's high social class, which still seems to make their relationship an impossibility. Helen claims that she is going on a pilgrimage, but she will actually go to Italy to find Bertram—is this lie to her mother-in-law justified?

The countess is sad at Helen's departure and furious with her son, who she calls an "unworthy husband." She orders for a letter to be sent to him stressing Helen's virtue and his failings. The countess hopes that when Bertram learns of Helen's departure, he will come back to Rossillion, and then Helen will return, as well, out of "pure love."

The countess does not seem to care about whether she and Bertram are "too good and fair" for Helen's social class. Rather, she sympathizes with Helen and continues to revise her judgment of her own son's character.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

In Florence, a widow, her daughter Diana, and a woman named Mariana discuss the feats of Bertram, who has "done most honorable service" in battle. The widow says that Parolles has tried to woo Diana on Bertram's behalf, and Mariana warns Diana to be careful with Bertram and to protect her modesty. Diana says that she has no intentions of giving into Bertram's advances.

Bertram has displayed manly courage in battle, but is also devoting much of his time to wooing Diana—he is not the "hater of love" he promised the duke he would be. Diana values her virginity and assumes a traditionally female role in defending her modesty against male advances.

Helen enters, and the widow says that she will let this pilgrim stay at her house for a night. She speaks with Helen and learns that she has come from France. She says that a Frenchman has "done worthy service" here in Italy, and asks if Helen knows of the count of Rossillion. Helen says she only knows of his noble reputation. Diana says that the count has been married "against his liking," and that his man Parolles speaks poorly of this wife.

Helen deceives the widow at first, pretending to be someone else. Helen claims that she has heard of Bertram's noble reputation and Diana speaks of Helen's poor reputation (via what she has heard from Parolles), but these reputations do not match up very accurately to the characters' actual natures.

Helen says that she believes Parolles' assessment of the wife's character and says the wife is "too mean / To have her name repeated." Helen learns from the widow that Bertram has been courting Diana, but that Diana "is armed for him and keeps her guard / In honestest defense." Just then, the army goes marching by, including Bertram and Parolles. Diana says she wishes Bertram were "honester," because he is a "handsome gentleman."

Still tricking the widow, Helen ironically pretends to agree with Parolles' false assessment of her own character, showing how false such reputations and rumors can be. Diana's defense against Bertram's advances is compared to a military defense, blurring the distinction between supposedly proper male and female activities.

Pointing out Parolles—whom she calls "that jackanapes with scarves"—Diana says that he is leading Bertram astray. The troops pass by, and the widow tells Helen to follow her to her house for the night. Helen thanks her, and asks for Diana to accompany them at dinner.

Diana seems to see through Parolles' bragging and posturing immediately. The idea that Parolles is a bad influence on Bertram may suggest that Bertram's character is changeable and not entirely innate or fixed.

ACT 3, SCENE 6

In Florence, some French noblemen warn Bertram that Parolles is not to be trusted. One calls Parolles "a most notable coward, an infinite and endless liar, an hourly promise-breaker." Bertram wonders how he can put Parolles to the test and see his true character, and one nobleman suggests that they can let Parolles try to recapture the military drum he has lost to the enemy.

Bertram is finally beginning to open up to the idea that Parolles is not the kind of person he thought he was, after repeated warnings from other people.

The noblemen plan to ambush Parolles, pretend to be the enemy, and kidnap him. Once he is blindfolded, they tell Bertram that Parolles will surely betray him and give secrets away to who he thinks is the enemy, in order to save his own life. Parolles enters, and Bertram and the noblemen speak of how dishonorable the loss of the drum was. Bragging, Parolles says that he could retrieve the drum. Bertram encourages him to try to retrieve it, and says that he and the duke will honor him if he is successful.

Parolles still tries to project a brave persona to Bertram, pretending to be brave and loyal. The noblemen's plan to expose Parolles' true nature as a coward uses deception to expose deception. Unlike Parolles' trickery, though, this sneaky plan has the justifiable end of revealing the truth about Parolles to Bertram.

Bertram tells Parolles that he is confident in Parolles' bravery and ability, and Parolles promises to go get the drum back from the enemy. Parolles leaves, and the noblemen tell Bertram that he will soon learn Parolles' true character. A nobleman says that Parolles will not even try to retrieve the drum from the enemy, and will try to make up a story about it. Some of the noblemen leave, and Bertram takes one nobleman to show him Diana, the "fair creature" he is trying to seduce.

Bertram is suspicious of Parolles' lies, but he himself lies here when he tells Parolles that he is confident in him. Still, Bertram's deception is perhaps justified because his goal is to expose Parolles' true nature, whereas Parolles' has no goal other than helping himself. Despite the war and the matter with Parolles, Bertram is still mainly concerned with wooing Diana.

ACT 3, SCENE 7

At the Florentine widow's home, Helen tries to persuade the widow that she is actually Bertram's wife. The widow says she will believe Helen if she can produce proof of her fortune, and Helen gives the widow a bag of gold. She promises the widow more gold if she will help her with her plan.

Helen finally reveals her true identity to the widow. Helen's social class is not high enough to marry Bertram easily, but it is high enough to allow her to persuade the widow with her wealth.

Helen plans to have Diana appear to give into Bertram's advances and to agree to sleep with him if he will give her an ancestral **ring** that he wears on his finger. Then, at night, Helen will take Diana's place in her bed and sleep with Bertram in the dark. She promises to pay the widow for her help. The widow agrees to the plan and says that Bertram comes to Diana every night singing songs to try to woo her. Helen suggests they carry out the plan that night, and says that while the plan is deceitful, it is lawful.

Just as Bertram plans to use justifiable trickery to reveal Parolles' true nature in the realm of war, Helen plans to use justifiable trickery to get Bertram to fulfill his obligations in the realm of love. Thus, she thinks that her deceitful plan is lawful. The exchange of Bertram's ring symbolizes both his giving up his own form of chastity to his wife and his sharing his inherited nobility with her.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Some French lords and soldiers hide in a hedge, ready to ambush Parolles. They plan to speak nonsense around Parolles, so he thinks he is being captured by a foreign enemy. Parolles walks by, talking to himself. Parolles says that he can return back to the French camp in a few hours, pretending to have gone on an expedition to retrieve the drum. He says he is scared of battle and thinks that it is impossible to get the drum back.

Parolles plans to deceive Bertram and the other noblemen, only pretending to have searched for the drum. Comically, as he plots his deception, he is himself about to be the victim of a deceptive plot. The entire play is a continuing series of deceptions, where those who trick others are soon tricked themselves.

Parolles plans to give himself "some hurts" and say that he was hurt while fighting the enemy. But, he doesn't want to have to injure himself, and debates instead getting rid of his clothes and saying he was stripped by the enemy. The French noblemen jump on Parolles, seize him, and blindfold him. They speak nonsense, and Parolles thinks that they are Russian soldiers. One of the soldiers says that he speaks Parolles' language, and pretends to be an interpreter.

Parolles goes to comical extremes to avoid actually going on the mission he promised Bertram he would go on. But now the play's ultimate trickster is himself duped. The play uses such scenes of trickery to examine the subject of deceit, but also, here, uses them for comedic value.

The soldier pretending to be an interpreter tells Parolles that his life will be spared if he can share some valuable information about the Florentine forces. Parolles begs for his life and says, "all the secrets of our camp I'll show." The soldiers and noblemen carry Parolles away, and one of the noblemen calls for Bertram to be brought to see Parolles.

Parolles displays his true, untrustworthy character. In his cowardice, he fails to live up to the masculine ideals of bravery in battle that he tries to project when he brags to Bertram and others.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Elsewhere in Florence, Bertram tries to seduce Diana. He tells her that she is cold to rebuff his advances, and says that he was forced to marry Helen but does not love her. He promises to love Diana and give her "all rights of service," but she says that his oaths are empty. He swears that he is an honest man.

Issues of dishonesty and deception are important not only in battle (as with Parolles betraying his fellow soldiers) but also in romantic affairs, as Bertram tries to seduce Diana with his promises and oaths.

Diana asks Bertram to give her a **ring** he is wearing, but he says he cannot, as it is "an honor . . . bequeathed down from many ancestors." Diana says that her chastity is similarly a "jewel. . . bequeathed down from many ancestors," and demands the ring. Bertram gives it to her, and Diana tells him to come to her room at midnight. She tells him that after they sleep together he can only stay in her bed an hour and should not speak to her.

Diana is able to use her virginity to her own advantage, bargaining with it as if it were a precious jewel, in order to take an active role in her dealings with Bertram. Bertram's ring is associated with his noble ancestors, and thus to some degree symbolizes the noble heritage that he refuses to share with Helen as his wife.

Diana tells Bertram that she will give him a ring as a sign of their time together. She says to him, "You have won / A wife of me." Bertram is elated, and leaves. Diana comments that Bertram tried to woo her in precisely the manner her mother said he would, since "all men / Have the like oaths." She promises to remain unmarried all her life, and says that Bertram deserves to be tricked.

Just after accusing Bertram of swearing false oaths, Diana herself lies to Bertram as part of Helen's deceptive plot. But like Helen, Diana thinks her deception is justified. Diana's comment about men suggests a wry awareness on the part of women about stereotypical, clichéd male wooing tactics.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

Two French noblemen discuss a letter they have just delivered to Bertram from his mother. They say that Bertram "has much worthy blame laid upon him," and has "incurred the everlasting displeasure of the King." One of the noblemen tells the other that Bertram has just successfully wooed a local woman. They talk about the recent war, which has just concluded with "an overture of peace."

Even the other French noblemen are forced to revise their understanding of Bertram, and think that he has shown bad character in dishonoring Helen. Meanwhile, the war has found a rather quick resolution, and has not seriously gotten in the way of Bertram's romantic pursuits.

The noblemen discuss Helen, who they say has died during her pilgrimage. They say that Bertram will be "glad" at the death of his wife, and remark on how life often mixes good and bad fortune, as "a mingled yarn, good and ill together." A servant enters and asks about Bertram. The noblemen tell him that Bertram is leaving to return to France the next morning.

Bertram's problematic marriage to Helen also seems (to him and others) to have found a quick, easy resolution with Helen's apparent death. Her death, however, will later be revealed to be merely another of the play's deceptions.

Bertram enters and says that he has accomplished a remarkable number of things in one day: he has met with the duke, mourned his newly deceased wife, made preparations for leaving Florence, and wooed Diana. He asks about Parolles, and one of the noblemen informs him that Parolles has confessed information to those he believes to be the enemy. Parolles is brought in, blindfolded, with the soldier pretending to be an enemy interpreter.

At this point, Bertram is pleased to think that all the issues he has been juggling have been easily fixed and resolved. (Little does he know, his relationships with Helen and Diana are far from resolved.) Meanwhile, he is set to learn the truth about Parolles' character.

The French soldiers and noblemen speak in gibberish around Parolles, and the "interpreter" tells him that he will be tortured unless he gives some information. Parolles divulges how many troops the Florentines have. As he is questioned further, he says exactly how many soldiers each Florentine commander has.

Parolles displays his real, cowardly character in betraying his allies, who, ironically, have betrayed him first by pretending to be enemy forces and kidnapping him.

The noblemen ask Parolles about one of them, Captain Dumaine. Parolles, not realizing that Dumaine is one of his kidnappers, says that he is a "lousy" commander. The soldiers search Parolles' pockets and find a letter to Diana, in which Parolles tells her that Bertram is "a fool and full of gold." Parolles says that he wanted to warn the girl, because Bertram is "a dangerous and lascivious boy, who is a whale to virginity and devours up all the fry it finds." A soldier reads the rest of Parolles' letter out loud, wherein Parolles calls Bertram a fool and continues to warn Diana against him.

The noblemen's trick with the fake kidnapping both exposes Parolles as a fraud and inserts some comedy into the play based on dramatic irony, since the audience, unlike Parolles, knows the real identities of his kidnappers. In line with stereotypes about gender roles, Parolles' letter paints virginity as something to be taken and "devoured" by aggressive, dominant men like Bertram.

The "interpreter" tells Parolles that he will die, and Parolles begs to be spared. The soldier asks him again about Dumaine, and Parolles says that Dumaine is a liar, a thief, and a thoroughly dishonest man who is unskilled in war. Bertram now sees what Parolles is really like, and shouts, "a pox on him!" The soldiers ask Parolles about Dumaine's brother, and Parolles says that he is the same as Dumaine, maybe more evil. Parolles promises to betray the Florentine forces if his life is spared.

This scene is riddled with layers of deception and trickery: Parolles accuses Dumaine of being dishonest, when he is himself an untrustworthy trickster. But, ironically, he is being tricked and lied to by Dumaine and other noblemen. No one is wholly trustworthy, which makes evaluating someone's character (like that of Parolles or Dumaine) difficult.

The "interpreter" tells Parolles that he must die, and Parolles begs for his life, or at least for his blindfold to be taken off. The soldiers remove his blindfold, and Bertram and the others say goodbye to him, then leave for France without him. Alone on-stage, Parolles says that realizes he is a "braggart," and will now live as "simply the thing I am." He plans to live in "fool'ry" and shame, and leaves to go follow Bertram and the other French noblemen.

At last, the deceptions are laid bare: Bertram discovers Parolles' true identity, and Parolles discovers the true identities of his kidnappers. Parolles decides to embrace his identity as a braggart and a fool. In paradoxical, ironic terms he decides to be true to his identity as a liar.

ACT 4, SCENE 4

The next day, Helen journeys with the widow and Diana to go find the king of France in Marseilles. She thanks Diana and her mother for helping her in her plot against Bertram (which went successfully), and tells them that everyone else thinks she is dead. She says that she will go and hurry to France with Diana and the widow to conclude matters with Bertram, since "all's well that ends well," and only the end is what matters, "whate'er the course" it takes to get there.

Helen has found a remedy for her seemingly impassable problem with Bertram. She has deceived Bertram in bed and lied generally in faking her own death, but in her mind all this deception is justified if it can contribute to her goal of making Bertram live up to his role as her husband, since "all's well that ends well." But do the ends necessarily justify the (deceptive) means in such a situation?

ACT 4, SCENE 5

In Rossillion, the countess has just learned of Helen's apparent death. She and Lafew lament the death of "the most virtuous gentlewoman that ever nature had praise for creating," and Lafew blames Bertram's bad behavior on the influence that Parolles had over him. The fool teases Lafew with some clever wordplay and doesn't stop annoying him until Lafew gives him some money and tells him to leave.

The countess and Lafew both admire Helen's virtuous character regardless of whether she was as noble or high-ranking as other gentlewomen. The low-ranking fool continues to poke fun at his powerful social superiors.

After the fool leaves, Lafew tells the countess that he has spoken to the king about Bertram possibly marrying his (Lafew's) daughter, now that Helen is dead. The countess says that she would be happy with such a marriage. Lafew tells her that the king is due to arrive from Marseilles the next day. The countess is glad to hear this, and says that her son is also due to arrive soon. The fool enters and says that Bertram has just arrived, with "a patch of velvet on 's face." He says he doesn't know whether the patch of velvet is hiding a valiant battle scar or not (such patches were also used to cover marks from venereal diseases). Lafew and the countess go to see Bertram.

The countess and Lafew move on quickly from the sad topic of Helen's death to the issue of Bertram's next marriage, as if forcing the matter of finding a happy conclusion. Lafew strategizes to marry his daughter to a wealthy count—the proposed marriage has little to do with a romantic attachment. Bertram's ambiguous velvet patch casts doubt on whether Bertram engaged in honorable military matters in Italy or simply has scars from a different kind of "battlefield."

ACT 5, SCENE 1

Helen, the widow, and Diana arrive in Marseilles to find the king of France. Helen sees a gentleman whom she recognizes from the royal court and greets him. She asks the gentleman to deliver a "petition" from her to the king and take her to see him. The gentleman informs her that the king left the previous night for Rossillion, where he is also headed. Helen gives him the petition and asks him to give it to the king. The gentleman agrees and Helen thanks him before leaving with the widow and Diana.

The king's absence from Marseilles throws a bit of a wrench in Helen's plot, but she still has a plan in mind to find a final fix for her problems with Bertram. As she, Diana, and the widow approach Rossillion, so too does the play approach its necessary resolution.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Parolles arrives in Rossillion and meets the fool. He asks the fool to give a letter to Lafew, and says that he is now "muddied in Fortune's mood," and does "smell somewhat strong of her strong displeasure." The fool takes his metaphor literally, commenting that Parolles does indeed smell. The fool refuses to deliver the letter, and Lafew enters. The fool leaves.

Parolles has fallen significantly in his peers' esteem and therefore in the hierarchy of the play's social world. Not even the lowly fool listens to him now, refusing to deliver the letter to Lafew.

Parolles tells Lafew that he has suffered misfortune, but Lafew has little sympathy for him. Parolles tells Lafew who he is, and Lafew teases him about the drum he lost in Italy. Parolles begs him "to bring me in some grace." Lafew calls Parolles a knave but finally takes some pity on him and tells him to come with him to eat, addressing him as "sirrah" (a term used by noblemen to address social inferiors).

While Helen's trajectory in the play shows the possibility of some upward social mobility, that of Parolles shows the perils of sliding down the social ladder. Early in the play, he was offended at Bertram being called his master, but now he willingly serves Lafew and accepts being called "sirrah."

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Speaking to the countess, the king laments the death of Helen and says that Bertram didn't realize how good of a wife she was. The countess asks the king to forgive her son for his youthful rashness, and the king says, "I have forgiven and forgotten all." Lafew says that Bertram offended the king, the countess, and Helen with his behavior, and lost "a wife / Whose beauty did astonish the survey / Of richest eyes." The king calls for Bertram to come forward but not to ask pardon, as the king has forgiven him entirely.

The king laments Bertram's misjudgment of Helen's character, but is quick to forgive him. Again, it is as if the characters are forcing the play's movement toward a happy ending prematurely.

The king tells Lafew that Bertram will marry Lafew's daughter. Bertram enters and apologizes to the king. The king tells Bertram not to waste any time apologizing, as he is old, and asks if Bertram knows of Lafew's daughter. Bertram says that he used to wish to marry her, before he was married to Helen. He says that he loved Helen, and the king says that it reflects well on Bertram that he at least loved his wife.

The marriage between Lafew's daughter and Bertram has been arranged without his knowledge, more a matter of positioning and uniting noble families than of two people in love. It seems likely that Bertram is lying when he says that he loved Helen as part of an effort to gain the king's favor and goodwill.

The king says that there is no use in talking about Helen's virtues now that she is dead, and asks Bertram to "now forget her," and marry Lafew's daughter. Lafew asks Bertram to give him a token or gift to pass along to his daughter, and Bertram gives him the ring that he thought Diana had given him in Florence (really it was Helen who gave it to him the night they slept together). Lafew and the king both recognize the ring as Helen's, and ask how Bertram got it.

The king—who early in the play was extremely pessimistic and dwelled on his sad, inevitable death—is now a force of optimism in the play, trying to persuade everyone to forget about Helen's death and move towards a happy resolution. The ring Bertram gives Lafew, though, ensures that matters are not yet resolved.

Bertram says that a woman in Florence threw it out a window to him, as she was courting him and didn't realize he was already married. He says that he rejected the woman's advances and told her he was married, but she wouldn't take the ring back. The king is sure the ring is Helen's and demands that Bertram "confess 'twas hers and by what rough enforcement / You got it from her." Bertram denies that the ring was Helen's, and the king calls him a liar. He has guards take Bertram away.

Bertram continues his habit of deception and plainly lies to the king. The king, who has just forgiven Bertram, must again change his opinion of the young count's character.

The king says that he is "wrapped in dismal thinkings," and suspects that Bertram may have had something to do with Helen's death. Just then, the gentleman whom Helen encountered at Marseilles enters and delivers her letter to the king. The letter is written by Diana and claims that Bertram seduced her and promised to marry her, before fleeing from Florence. She demands that the king make Bertram follow through on his promise. Lafew says that he won't let his daughter marry Bertram now. The king sends for Diana to be brought into the court.

Diana's letter exposes some of Bertram's deceptions, but it is itself a kind of lie, as Diana never really slept with Bertram. Like the king, Lafew has changed his opinion of Bertram's character, and no longer sees it as advantageous for his daughter to marry the duplicitous count.

Bertram is brought back in, and the king asks him why he wanted to marry Lafew's daughter, when apparently "wives are monsters" to him and he flees them as soon as he commits to them. Diana and the widow enter, and they both plead their case to the king. Diana calls herself Bertram's wife, but Bertram denies this. Lafew tells Bertram he will not get to marry his daughter anymore. Bertram says that Diana is a "fond and desp'rate creature," who is not telling the truth.

As the king's comment hints, Bertram seems to abhor marriage while desiring sex—not exactly the traditional, ideal relationship between sex and marriage upheld in society. The king must decide who is telling the truth, though both Bertram and Diana are lying to some degree. Again, practically no one in the play is always completely honest.

Diana asks the king to ask Bertram if he took her virginity. Bertram calls Diana "a common gamester to the camp," (i.e. someone who slept with many soldiers), and Diana says that he is lying. She produces his ancestral **ring** as proof of their union. The countess recognizes the ring and, seeing it as definitive proof, exclaims, "this is his wife."

Showing the limited roles available to women in this society, Diana can be either a chaste maiden or a shameful "common gamester." The ring seems like definitive proof of Diana's honesty, though it is really just more trickery, as Bertram gave it to Helen, not Diana.

Diana says that Parolles can testify to her case, and the king orders for Parolles to be brought to court. Bertram says that Parolles cannot be trusted to give truthful testimony, as he is "a most perfidious slave . . . whose nature sickens but to speak a truth." The king asks Bertram to explain how Diana has his ring, and Bertram says he used it to seduce her, but did not marry her.

Now that Bertram knows Parolles' real character, he claims that he can't be trusted as a witness. But, then again, neither he nor Diana are telling the full truth to the king, either. The king must try to discern the truth from among a group of tricksters and liars.

Diana says that Bertram lacks virtue, and says she will give him his ring back in exchange for hers (the ring that is actually Helen's). The king asks if Bertram's story about Helen's ring being thrown to him out a window is false, and Bertram confesses that this was a lie. Parolles enters and the king asks him about Diana and Bertram.

Diana tries to attack Bertram's credibility by denigrating his character. The king tries to sort through Bertram's lies to find the truth, but Diana is also not being entirely truthful.

Parolles says that Bertram had "tricks . . . which gentlemen have," and "did love her . . . as a gentleman loves a woman." The king asks Parolles to speak clearly about what Bertram did or didn't do, and Parolles says that Bertram was madly infatuated with Diana, slept with her, and may have promised her marriage. The king asks Diana how she got Helen's ring, and Diana says she never bought it, nor was given it, nor borrowed it from anyone. The king tells her the ring was given by him to Helen and demands that she say how she got the ring, threatening to kill her unless she tell the truth.

Parolles' comments suggest that romantic affairs like that between Bertram and Diana are actually common for gentlemen, in contrast to societal ideals. While he is generally untrustworthy, Parolles actually speaks the truth here, or at least what he thinks is the truth. The king is frustrated with what seem like lies from Diana, even though she is speaking the truth about the ring.

Diana says that Bertram is "guilty and he is not guilty." She says that he will claim she is not a virgin, but she is. The king is frustrated with her confusing talk and is about to have her dragged to jail, when she says that she will leave Bertram, who she says "hath abused me" but "never harmed me." She says that Bertram "got his wife with child," and says that "one that's dead is quick," as Helen enters.

The web of lies and deceit that has been growing throughout the play comes to a head, and the king doesn't know what to believe. Finally, Helen enters to reveal the truth about what has happened and to usher in the play's final resolution.

Bertram and the king are shocked to see Helen alive. Helen shows Bertram the letter he wrote her long ago in which he said that he would only be her husband if she got his ring and was pregnant with his child. She says that both of these conditions have been fulfilled and asks what he will do. Bertram says, "If she . . . can make me know this clearly, / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly."

Helen has successfully overcome Bertram's seemingly impossible conditions, and has seemingly solved her problem. But Bertram's pledge is still phrased in a conditional "if" statement, and it is not clear whether he can be trusted and really will love Helen in the future.

Lafew starts to cry at seeing that Helen is not dead. The king asks Helen to explain what has happened, and then turns to Diana. He tells her that she can choose any husband she wants, and he will pay for her dowry, so long as she is "yet a fresh uncropped flower." He concludes the play by saying, "All yet seems well, and if it end so meet, / The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet."

Now that Helen and Bertram's marriage has been fixed (though again, has it really?), the king makes the play's happy ending complete by rewarding Diana. Her reward is only given to her, though, because she is still a virgin, emphasizing the traditional importance of virginity until marriage.

EPILOGUE

The king comes out on stage and tells the audience that the play is over. He says that "all is well ended," and asks that the audience show their appreciation for the play by applauding

The king returns onstage to emphasize again the play's happy conclusion, even though the play's ending may be more ambiguous than the king would like to let on.

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