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All's Well that Ends Well and 'The Common Stock of Narrative Tradition'

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Despite the assurance offered in its title, the ending of *All's Well that Ends Well* remains a cause of critical concern. Dr Johnson's account is still the most succinct:

I cannot reconcile my heart to Bertram; a man noble without generosity, and young without truth; who marries Helen as a coward and leaves her as a profligate; when she is dead by his unkindness, sneaks home to a second marriage, is accused by a woman whom he has wronged, defends himself by falsehood, and is dismissed to happiness.¹

Helena herself contributes to the problem. Aspiring to a man of much higher rank than herself, she enlists the authority of the King of France to marry him against his will, and when still rejected, resorts to more devious methods to win him back from his sexual escapades elsewhere. The task of reconciling these impressions has led to the judgment of *All's Well that Ends Well* as 'one of Shakespeare's most interesting failures'.²

Although some of the problems may be inherent in the source material, I believe that the main difficulty is that we lack the conceptual framework in which the play is to be understood. In the ninth novel of the third day of his *Decameron*, Boccaccio told the story of Giletta of Narbona, daughter of a physician, who had been brought up in the household of the Count of Rossiglione and had fallen in love with his son Beltramo. Making use of remedies learnt from her father, she cured the King of France of a fistula when all others had failed and secured Beltramo as her reward. He then fled the country without consummating the union, leaving the scornful message: 'Let her do what she liste. For I do purpose to dwell with her, when she shall have this ring [meaning a ring which he wore] upon her finger, and

a sonne in her arms begotten by mee.' Pursuing Beltramo to Florence in the guise of a pilgrim, Giletta joined forces with the widow whose daughter Beltramo was trying to seduce. By taking the daughter's place in bed, she gained the ring from his finger and two sons to present to him in due course. Giletta was thereupon restored to her lawful position by the Count, and 'from that time forth, hee loved and honoured her, as his dere spouse and wyfe'.³

William Witherle Lawrence pointed out many years ago that in dramatizing such a story, Shakespeare was drawing upon 'the common stock of narrative tradition'.⁴ The folk elements he singled out were 'the healing of the king' and 'the fulfilment of the tasks', both depending on the role of 'the clever wench'. By citing analogues from India, Turkey, Norway, Iceland, France, and Spain, Lawrence argued that these patterns would have been so familiar to Shakespeare's audience as to guide their response. Helena would not have seemed immodest in undertaking the wooing, or devious in resorting to the bed-trick; Bertram would have been taken for granted as a worthy prize for the heroine, and the suddenness of his conversion at the end would have been accepted as readily as the 'great honour and felicitie' that followed.

Although the 'clever wench' stories are basic to an understanding of *All's Well that Ends Well*, there are some key points where the pattern does not fit. It has been remarked, for example, that Shakespeare departs from the source in his motivation of Helena's journey to Florence. In Boccaccio, the expedition is undertaken with the purpose of finding a way to fulfil the impossible tasks, and the pilgrim's guise is assumed as part of this strategy. In the play, Helena leaves because her presence in France has driven Bertram from it, and she becomes Saint Jacques's pilgrim in a spirit of penitence. The role of 'clever wench' is here laid aside.

The explanation is to be sought in the 'common stock of narrative tradition' on which the play draws. The pattern which comes through in the motivation of Helena's journey is one acknowledged in the folk materials surveyed by Lawrence, but not sufficiently distinguished from the 'clever wench' theme. He describes it rather misleadingly as 'a Virtue Story' (p. 49). It can best be illustrated in an English version mentioned in passing by Lawrence, which Shakespeare would very probably have known — the story of the Nut-Brown Maid.

The ballad of the Nut-Brown Maid seems first to have found its way into print in *Arnold's Chronicle*, in editions conjecturally dated 1503 and 1525. It was one of the ballads collected by Bishop Percy in his *Reliques*, and it had a further life in the eighteenth century when rewritten by Matthew Prior in the bourgeois poem *Henry*

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and *Emma*. An antipodean version appeared in the nineteenth century in the Australian ballad 'The Banks of the Condamine'.⁵ I quote from the text of 'The Nut-Brown Maid' in the *Oxford Book of Ballads*, edited by Arthur Quiller-Couch.

The ballad is in dialogue form. The first speaker is a knight condemned to be an outlaw, whose utterances have the refrain,

For I must to the green-wood go,
Alone, a banished man.

The second speaker is the Nut-Brown Maid, who promises to share his lot come what may, with the repeated assurance,

For, in my mind, of all mankind
I love but you alone.

He presents an unrelenting catalogue of the sufferings she will have to endure. She will lose her reputation and lead a criminal life under the threat of hanging; she will be exposed to thorny ways, and frost and rain, and be denied meat and wine and clean sheets; she will have to cut her hair up to her ear and her kirtle to her knee and fight off her enemies with bow in hand. The Nut-Brown Maid is undaunted at every challenge, even at the accusation that she is so 'light of love' as to make the same promises to anyone who asks. The knight then claims that he has a paramour in the woods. The Nut-Brown Maid replies that she will gladly wait upon her — and, if need be, on a hundred more. The knight reveals that he is not a banished man, nor yet a squire of low degree:

By way of marriage
I will you take, and lady make,
As shortly as I can:
Thus have you won an Earle's son,
And not a banished man.

Although the ballad has moralizing verses before and after to prove that women in love are 'meek, kind, and stable', 'The Nut-Brown Maid' is imprecisely described as 'a Virtue Story'. The leading features of it, and of others in its class, are as follows:

1) A series of indignities are visited on the female partner. This is most conspicuous in the folk-tale analogue of Patient Griselda, also related in Boccaccio, and re-told in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and again in Dekker's *Patient Grissil* (1599–1603).

2) Her appropriate response is one of total submissiveness. In this the patience of Griselda consists, but the same pattern is found in the chivalric version of Chretien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*, where Enide obeys all Erec's irrational commands and blames herself for the dangers to which he exposes himself. Tennyson re-told the story in 'Geraint and Enid' in *Idylls of the King*, drawing on *The Mabinogion*.

3) There is usually a disparity in rank separating the two partners. Griselda comes from peasant stock, while her husband is a marquis. Enide is found in an impoverished household, where she performs menial tasks and wears a gown full of holes. There is a presumption in her name that the Nut-Brown Maid is of low birth, and the knight at the end declares that he will her a 'lady make'. As she is also described as 'a baron's daughter', and he is revealed as an earl's son, the pattern is doubled (or the surviving ballad may conflate two versions of the story).

4) The humiliations are in an ascending scale, reaching a climax just before the reversal comes. In 'The Nut-Brown Maid' the paramour in the woods is the crowning insult; in the Griselda story it is Griselda's becoming the servant of the bride who is to supplant her. The growing enormity of these humiliations may help to insulate the story in a fairy-tale world.

5) As the indignities multiply and the submissive attitude persists, the submissiveness loses much of that character. The wench becomes part of a contest, and although she may display no cleverness, she is not the one who yields.

The dramatic consequences of this structure for the male role I shall discuss later:⁶ the present necessity is to show what the structure is. It is worth disentangling from the 'clever wench' theme, which is apposite to some parts of *All's Well that Ends Well* but not to it all. A review of the action from a different standpoint may indicate how the 'clever wench' model is often displaced, in puzzling and sometimes disquieting ways.

It seems to hold in the earlier part of the action, concerned with 'the healing of the king'. Lawrence saw this as falling under the principle of the deeds performed by the 'clever wench' before marriage, as the 'impossible tasks' represent those performed after. In the first scene Helena's secret grief at the departure of Bertram overpowers her grief at her father's death, and there are strong indications that it is the physical Bertram whom she loves, with his 'arched brows, his hawking eye, his

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curls', and 'every trick and line of his sweet favour' (I. 1. 92, 94). She undertakes the project of curing the King in a strong spirit of self-reliance:

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
Which we ascribe to heaven; the fated sky
Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.
What power is it which mounts my love so high,
That makes me see, and cannot feed mine eye? (I. 1. 202–07)

— the last image is of a hawk which can see its prey, but is yet to seize it.

At the same time the 'clever wench' pattern is being given a different emphasis. The Countess, who is one of Shakespeare's additions to the plot, is made privy to Helena's love for Bertram and comes to approve of it. She also approves of Helena's mission to Paris, although she is not informed that Bertram is its final object. The oracular style which Helena adopts in her soliloquy above is established more firmly in her interview with the King, as though she were the agent of powers not her own:

It is not so with Him that all things knows
As 'tis with us that square our guess by shows;
But most it is presumption in us when
The help of heaven we count the act of men.
Dear sir, to my endeavours give consent;
Of heaven, not me, make an experiment. (II. 1. 148–53)

This would contradict the earlier speech, if we chose to compare them. As the cure is undertaken with 'the greatest Grace lending grace' (II. 1. 159), any sense of stratagem is necessarily subdued. Helena is on a curiously sanctified mission, and in some degree the instrument of higher powers. She is of course further dignified in the King's long disquisition on honour — so impressive a statement that critics have looked to it for a key to the play's meaning.

The disparity in rank between Bertram and Helena receives more emphasis in the play than it had in the source. Shakespeare found in Boccaccio (or Painter) a heroine who was a wealthy heiress, able to reject suitors; he preferred an impoverished girl on the model of Griselda or Enide. The preoccupation with the

issue of rank in *All's Well* is closer to these stories than to Boccaccio, where Beltramo's complaint that Giletta is not of a stock 'convenient to his nobility' does not come to engross the narrative. The play stops to debate the issue, to extend the argument between Bertram and the King, and to allow for the royal homily on birth, virtue, and honour. This emphasis is interesting, but hardly a key to the play, for from this point onward the issue of rank is not heard of again.

There is a more decisive shift in the action with Bertram's flight to the Tuscan wars. Parolles announces to Helena that her husband will not tarry for his wedding night; that she is to take her leave of the King; that she is then to await further instructions. Her response to the first announcement is 'What's his will else?'; to the second 'What more commands he?'; and to the third 'In everything I wait upon his will' (II. 4. 45, 49, 53). When Bertram next instructs her to return alone to Rossillion, without asking why, Helena replies:

Sir, I can nothing say
But that I am your most obedient servant (II. 5. 71–72)

and although he interrupts impatiently, she continues:

And ever shall
With true observance seek to eke out that
Wherein toward me my homely stars have fail'd
To equal my great fortune. (II. 5. 73–76)

When her one request for a farewell kiss is met with the injunction to 'haste to horse', she again complies meekly:

I shall not break your bidding, good my lord.
Where are my other men? Monsieur, farewell. (II. 5. 88–89)

The pattern of unquestioning submissiveness is impossible to mistake. The play insists and insists again on the complete subservience of Helena to whatever Bertram commands. A further stage is reached when Helena receives Bertram's letter with the impossible conditions about the ring and the child and the message 'Till I have no wife I have nothing in France' (III. 2. 74). With deeper self-abnegation, she takes all the blame upon herself:

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Nothing in France until he has no wife!
Thou shalt have none, Rossillion, none in France;
Then hast thou all again. Poor lord, is't I
That chase thee from thy country, and expose
Those tender limbs of thine to the event
Of the none-sparing war? . . .
Whoever charges on his forward breast,
I am the caitiff that do hold him to't;
And though I kill him not, I am the cause
His death has so effected. (III. 2. 99–104; 112–15)

She banishes herself from France to atone for these offences, and the role of pilgrim is adopted in the same hope of expiation:

Ambitious love hath so in me offended
That barefoot plod I the cold ground upon,
With sainted vow my faults to have amended. (III. 4. 5–7)

This Helena is clearly not the Shavian heroine some have found in the play. As has been noted already, this is also a marked deviation from the original story. All of Giletta's actions after Beltramo absconds are part of a plan to get him back. She returns to Rossiglione, and, 'hoping by her well doinge to cause him to retourne into his countrye', she wins the love of the populace by restoring just rule. She makes the offer to leave France if that would bring him back, and receives the riposte about the ring and the heir. Giletta ponders this and sets off to Florence to pursue her design, adopting the pilgrim's role as a subterfuge. These are all the moves of the 'clever wench', but none of them is established in Shakespeare in those terms. While it might seem careless plotting for Helena to turn up in Florence when she has not set out to travel there, it is consistent with the direction the play has now taken.

It would be tempting to see Helena's self-abnegation as a turning-point in the action, leading on to the happy ending, but in fact the 'clever wench' theme is now reinstated. Helena secures the co-operation of Diana and the Widow in the bed-trick and doubles the ring plot so that Bertram's eventual discomfiture will be all the greater. Again, however, the pattern is muted by Helena's claim to be the agent of some divine purpose:

Doubt not but heaven
Hath brought me up to be your daughter's dower,
As it hath fated her to be my motive
And helper to a husband. (IV. 4. 18–21)

and also by her arranging to be reported dead, so that she is placed behind the scenes, like the Duke in *Measure for Measure*. Where in the source the Widow and her daughter drop out of the story in Florence, in the play they need to be brought to France to confront the Count.

The various departures from the original story — the doubling of the rings, the reported death of Helena, the extended roles of Diana and the Widow — go far beyond what is required for the fulfilment of the tasks. The proposed second marriage of Bertram also has no precedent in Boccaccio, although it is part of the story of patient Griselda, and may have a variant in the paramour in 'The Nut-Brown Maid'. Are the concluding scenes of *All's Well* reflecting the 'contest' pattern of these stories, as Bertram is forced from one position to another, and Diana holds the stage with defiant claims and riddling answers? The 'fulfilment of the tasks' is so subordinated that the climax of that story, the production of the child, is omitted (though we may assume that Helena is visibly pregnant).

All these changes may of course be explained as Shakespeare's building up and complicating the denouement. They have the effect of making Bertram's role more unsympathetic. Any extended treatment of these traditional narratives has the capacity to make Griselda's marquis seem sadistic, Erec boorish and obstinate, and the knight in the ballad a cad. Far from subduing these possibilities in the story of Bertram and Helena, Shakespeare has intensified them by having the Countess take Helena's part, by introducing Parolles to place Bertram in a sleazy companionship, and by exposing before the King his profligacy and falsehood in his relations with Diana. No hero in this tradition utters fewer words of penitence. There is only the exclamation 'O pardon!' (V. 3. 302) and the still conditional,

If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly
I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly. (V. 3. 309–10)

Some redefinition of 'the common stock of narrative tradition' behind *All's Well* helps to clarify what is actually happening at certain points in the play. The 'clever wench' pattern is displaced in some areas of the action by the submissiveness of the Nut-Brown Maid theme, and in places where it does prevail,

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the pattern is modified more than is generally recognized. This enquiry indicates, however, that the perplexities of *All's Well* are not likely to be resolved by the study of sources and analogues. What such a study emphasizes is a marked restlessness on Shakespeare's part among the materials which the narrative tradition offers, a tendency to risk its potentialities, and to imperil its fairy-tale character. This makes the imaginative projection which the play calls for all the more difficult to achieve. Dr Johnson's response in the eighteenth century may show how far *All's Well* had already broken away from the traditions behind it. The only remaining justification of Bertram may lie outside this framework: it is simply that he is loved.

NOTES

- 1 *Dr Johnson on Shakespeare*, edited by W. K. Wimsatt (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 113.
- 2 Mark van Doren, *Shakespeare* (New York, 1939), p. 210.
- 3 Quotations are from the English translation of Boccaccio in William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1575), as reprinted in the Appendix to the Arden edition: *All's Well that Ends Well*, edited by G. K. Hunter (London, 1983), pp. 145–52. Subsequent references are to this edition.
- 4 William Witherle Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*, second edition (New York, 1960), p. 18.
- 5 See Douglas Stewart and Nancy Keesing, *Old Bush Songs* (Sydney, 1957), pp. 257–58, and Ron Edwards, *The Big Book of Australian Folk Song* (Adelaide, 1976), pp. 17–22.
- 6 They are partly indicated in the survival of the pattern, in a reversed form, in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison*. Harriet Vane consents to live with Philip Boyes because she thinks he honestly does not believe in marriage. Discovering that she has merely been put to the test, she rejects his proposal as an insult. This is the response of the twentieth-century heroine — whose firmness of mind also wins her a husband of higher rank. (I owe this perception to Mrs Helen Findlay.)