

Helena's Success and/or Failure in *All's Well That Ends Well*

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Introduction

Looking back on the critical history of Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, we find that the Romantic period and its new forms of criticism generated a number of its heroine's admirers. For Hazlitt, the play is 'one of the most pleasing of our author's comedies', and '[t]he character of [Helena] is one of great sweetness and delicacy'. This line of criticism was still followed by G. W. Knight, who claimed that

Helena possesses those old-world qualities of simplicity, sincerity, and integrity which Bertram lacks. She is loving, humble, and good, and in her there is no lack of piety to her forbears: indeed, her father's art descends to, and is used by, her.

For him Helena is 'the distilled essence of Shakespeare's view of feminine love' which is 'at her finest at submission', and Helena's only motivation is anxiety to serve Bertram.⁽¹⁾

While some critics have thus praised Helena for her meekness and self-abnegation, others have criticised her ambition: Helena has been seen as an opportunist, a social climber, and a ruthless predator. Clifford Leach claims that ambition is 'the force that turns Helena from a passive love-sickness to active planning', and that Shakespeare, though not so self-conscious as Jonson or Marston, portrays Helena's love in a satirical light.⁽²⁾

Helena, we might say, has these two contradictory aspects, and such duality has baffled critics of the play. They have usually preferred to see only one side and ignored the other. Some have tried to escape from the dilemma by stressing the folkloric element of the play. Thus Rossiter suggests:

I take [Helena] for granted, which is the right way with her. Analysis only results in confusion; for if you analyse her, you find that her only noble qualities are courage and the Stoical reserve... The rest of her qualities are: a possessive passion for her man; an unconquerable determination...; an accomplished opportunism or a good head for scheming; and the purely pragmatic virtue of success in action.⁽³⁾

Such refusal of analysis, however, does not go well with the psychological depth Shakespeare has added to his source. Although Helena does have contradictory aspects, I nevertheless think it worthwhile to attempt to analyse her actions. First, I discuss the establishment of female subjectivity in Helena through her conversation with Parolles. Then, her first failure in winning Bertram is discussed as a problematic exercise of female subjectivity in the patriarchal world. Finally, I discuss Helena's actions in the second half of the play as a strategy to exercise a cognitive control. Her success, limited as it is, is a loophole, as it were, for a woman to realise her desire.

1. The VirginitY Dialogue

The virginitY dialogue between Helena and Parolles offended the Victorians so much that they expurgated it from their acting editions. However, we must come face to face with the Helena represented by Shakespeare, not Helena as we may wish her to be, if we are to discuss the play. And if we see the play in this way, the conversation between Helena and Parolles becomes indispensable for our understanding of Helena. Her two soliloquies are divided by the conversation, and the difference between the two is so remarkable that we

should conclude the conversation has an important effect on her.

In her first soliloquy, Helena reveals the answer to her ambiguous first speech: 'I do affect a sorrow indeed, but I have it too' (1.1.54).⁽⁴⁾ The real cause of her sorrow is not the death of her father, but her hopeless love of Bertram. She loves Bertram, but there is an apparently inextricable problem of disparity in rank between Bertram and herself. Not only is there a social difference in rank, but there is also a sharp contrast between Bertram and Helena's emotional states. Bertram has just left the stage, full of hopes for his new life at court, while Helena can only bitterly contrast the past with the present (1.1.92 - 8). She is devastated by the hopelessness of her love, and confines herself to the position of a passive deplorer. She, like the older people of the play, is haunted, obsessed with death: 'there is no living, none, / If Bertram be away' (1.1.84 - 5).

Helena's soliloquy makes the tone of the scene almost tragic, but the entrance of Parolles immediately establishes a comic tone. His entrance wearing a vivid costume effectively visualises a departure from the previous death-obsessed tone, 'all in black' (1.1.0). And more significantly, through his bawdy banter with Helena, he changes her from a passive, tragic deplorer into an active, comic heroine, subjectively committing herself. It is Parolles who first introduces the theme of virginity casually: 'Are you meditating on virginity?' (1.1.110) Contrary to Quiller-Couch's wish that she 'would have dismissed Parolles by a turn of the back',⁽⁵⁾ Helena pursues the topic instead of rejecting it, and asks Parolles how a girl can defend her virginity. Parolles's flat answer to her question seems to suggest that he does not have a particular interest in talking about virginity. Surprisingly, it is Helena who shows a keenness in sticking to the topic. She persistently asks: 'But he assails, and our virginity though valiant, in the defence yet is weak' (1.1.115 - 6). Her unexpected eagerness to pursue the subject of virginity is perhaps an early hint of the direction in which she is moving.

However, at this point she still accepts the patriarchal idea of female passivity. It is her next speech that shows a subtle, but very important change. Picking

up Parolles's 'blow you up', she says: 'Is there no military policy how virgins might blow up men?' (1.1.121 - 2) Using the same phrasal verb to interchange the subject and the object, Helena transfers the aggressive subjectivity from man onto woman. The syntax of Parolles's reply seems to reflect a masculine logic that tries to deprive the feminine subject of this newly assumed subjectivity. He says: 'Virginity being blown down man will quicklier be blown up. Marry, in blowing him down again, with the breach yourselves made, you lose your city' (1.1.123 - 6). Virginity is again something to be 'blown down' by man, and the feminine subjectivity, according to him, leads to nothing but its own loss. However, Parolles's logic does not work, since uneasiness remains as far as man is also something to be 'blown up' and 'blown down'. It is perhaps this anxiety that makes Parolles leave off the military image started by Helena. He begins to speak in commercial terms, in which he can safely speak about virginity as an object to be sold and bought. Man is never to be regarded as object: he is always the subject who buys virginity.

Helena, on the other hand, becomes taciturn. While Parolles is producing his garrulous masculine arguments, perhaps she is following her own line of thinking. What Helena thinks about we can only imagine, but it seems at least certain that the possibility of female aggressiveness does not leave her even when she says: 'I will stand for't [i.e. for virginity] a little, though therefore I die a virgin' (1.1.133 - 4). For her meditation leads to the crucial question, 'How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking?' (1.1.150 - 1) The conversation with Parolles energises Helena, and turns a passive, hopeless Helena into an active, committed girl. Like cuckoldry plots, the possibility of subjective control over her own body empowers the woman. The second soliloquy testifies to this new Helena:

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.

(1.1.216 - 9)

The speech marks Helena's transition from death to life, from object to subject, from hopelessness to practicality, from 'fancy' to 'intents'.

However, this shift is not an acquirement of subjectivity she has entirely lacked. There seem to be a few indications of Helena's subjectivity even before she speaks with Parolles. The renunciation of the father is not so surprising in itself in a comedy, where the younger generation free themselves from the familial tie with the older generation to form a new family of their own. Nevertheless, it is startling in *All's Well* because Helena deceives the audience, as well as the Countess, by her 'affected' sorrow. The Countess naively believes that '[t]he remembrance of her father never approaches her heart but the tyranny of her sorrows takes all livelihood from her cheek' (1.1.49-51), and her belief directs the audience's response. Helena's cleverness of self-presentation corroborates her subjectivity.

Second, in her first soliloquy, Helena says: 'The hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love' (1.1.91-2). This seems a variation of 'there is no living', but the Elizabethan pun on 'die' as sexual orgasm adds to its connotations. Of course the image of a lion devouring a hind reflects the usual pattern of male - subject/female - object relationship, and yet I think that the occurrence of an image that anticipates the sexual consummation of her love does hint at her not yet revealed subjectivity. I am not suggesting that Helena disguises her subjectivity and pretends to be passive at the beginning of the play (as she will do in the second half of the play). Rather, I am suggesting that by the catalyst of Parolles she realises the usefulness of her own sexuality as a source of subjective pursuit, which she has had from the beginning.

2. 'Traffic in Women' Reversed and Regularised

Helena now considers how this new subjectivity can be translated into actual power operative in the patriarchal world where she lives. The next couplet reads: 'The king's disease — my project may deceive me, / But my intents are fix'd, and will not leave me' (1.1.228-9). It is clear that Helena already intends to take advantage of

the King's disease as a means to win Bertram. In other words, her intention is to show her 'merit' to the King, and to win Bertram's hand through the patriarchal authority of the King. And her cure of the King is made possible by her paternal legacy. As Portia wins Bassanio through the lottery her father contrived, Helena cures the King by 'some prescriptions / Of rare and prov'd effects' that have been bequeathed to her (1.3.221-2).

However, while Portia's casket selection of the husband ultimately confines her in the usual position of woman as wooed, Helena's use of her father's bequest makes her usurp the male prerogative of becoming a wooer. In this sense, her subjectivity is ambivalent: it is subversive because it reverses the accepted positions of man as wooer and woman as wooed, and yet it is contained because it is dependent on legitimate patriarchal authority. But it is also doubly subversive because it in a sense exceeds the patriarchal authority, for it is the 'preserver' (2.3.47) of the King's power, and thus puts the King's authority under control. Here Helena departs from the archetypal Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Helena in *MND* similarly pursues her love, but can do nothing to change her situation. She follows Demetrius into the forest, and wakes up to find that suddenly she is loved by two men. The situation is regularised: women are 'woo'd' and men 'fight for love' (*MND*, 2.1.241-2). The Helena in *All's Well*, on the other hand, is cognizant of the chance to make use of patriarchal power for the achievement of her end.

Helena thus represents the problematic female subjectivity, but the female sense of powerlessness seems so deeply internalised within this controversial feminine subject that her career is a complicated mixture of aggressive subjectivity and passivity. Helena recapitulates the whole process of transition from passivity to activity in front of the Countess again. With the Countess's encouragement, she resolves again to put her 'fix'd intent' into practice. Using the paternal legacy, she cures the King, and, having his authority behind her, legitimates her position as a female wooer. Now she is in the position to choose. Here, we have a significant departure from the source story. In Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*, it is the King who makes the

suggestion of the free choice of husband as a reward for Giletta's success.⁶⁵ In *All's Well*, Helena demands the reward of free choice before the King mentions it (2.1.193–200).

When Helena makes the ceremonial choice of her husband, the text does not make it clear whether the Lords are willing to be chosen, as their courtesies seem to imply, or they are reluctant, as Lafew's comments suggest (2.3.86–8; 93–5). What is clear, however, is that in the selection scene, a woman is given subjectivity, while men are objects to be chosen, contrary to the usual patriarchal discourse. The situation is summed up by the King: 'Thou hast power to choose, and they none to forsake' (2.3.56). The ambiguity of Lafew's comments may reflect the uncomfortableness of male aristocrats who are placed in the female position of objects to be chosen.⁶⁷

At the same time, however, Helena's internalised sense of feminine powerlessness remains. She emphatically says that she is 'a simple maid', and her cheeks 'blush that thou [i.e. Helena] shoud'st choose' (2.3.66–72). And when she declares her choice, she turns her subversive feminine subjectivity into a total submission to the patriarchal idea of marriage:

I dare not say I take you, but I give
Me and my service, ever whilst I live,
Into your guiding power. (2.3.102–4)

This gesture nullifies the initial condition that has made her choice of Bertram possible. By disclaiming her own subjectivity, Helena seems to lose control over the situation. Up to this point, Helena has been the focus of the scene, and more significantly, she has been directing the scene so that its focus falls on her. In sharp contrast with this, as soon as she abdicates her subjectivity, the scene's focus is shifted to the masculine confrontation between the King and Bertram, over which she has no control.

In the source story, not only Beltramo but the King, too, is repugnant to the marriage (147). In Shakespeare's version, however, the King is most insistent that Bertram marry Helena. Having his masculinity rejuvenated by Helena, the King has made

his honour dependent on Helena. To show that his virility is really regenerated, he must carry out his promise that he will serve Helena's 'will' with his 'performance' (2.1.202; sexual puns are obvious). Bertram, on the other hand, cannot agree to be married with Helena, because it will tarnish his manhood and threaten his fragile identity.⁶⁸ A female body thus generates a rivalry between males. They confront each other:

King. Thou know'st she has rais'd me from my
sickly bed.
Ber. But follows it, my lord, to bring me down
Must answer for your raising? (2.3.111–3)

Helena, during this confrontation between two masculine subjects, loses her subjectivity and becomes an object of the male dispute. The diminution of Helena's presence is expressed verbally. During the rest of the scene, she is given only one speech, and that speech is to renounce the original condition that has given her subjectivity: '[t]hat you are well restor'd, my lord, I'm glad. / Let the rest go' (2.3.147–8). The King's next speech, though it is cued by Helena's speech, is not so much directed to her as to Bertram, and significantly, it is in blank verse. The King has been speaking in rhymed couplets, but he stops using them here. In the play so far, rhymed speeches are closely associated with Helena. In the scene where Helena persuades the King to try her treatment, rhymed speeches are used to amplify their mutual agreement; in the preceding choice scene, Helena speaks in couplets, while Bertram's refusal is made in blank verse. The change of style in the King's speech suggests that he is now engaged in argument with Bertram, leaving Helena behind. Whether Bertram accepts Helena or not has already become an issue between the King and him, not between him and Helena any more. It is not whether Helena can win Bertram or not, but whether the King can make Bertram obey him or not. It matters little how Helena feels. What matters is the King's 'honor' and 'will' and Bertram's 'good' (2.3.149–58).

Helena has thus become no more than a place where male rivalry is negotiated, an object over which

two subjects dispute. The King, who, at the beginning of the scene calls Helena his 'preserver', now says that she is a 'gift' from him to Bertram (2.3.151). Clearly she is turned into a commodity in a male-to-male transaction. Once Helena renounces her subjectivity, the patriarchal structure is immediately re-established and reinforced, and denies her subjectivity. Her machination has both succeeded and failed. It has succeeded in that she has won the man she wanted, but it has failed because she has won him only nominally. We can perhaps give two reasons for her failure. The first is that her project has been too dependent upon the patriarchal authority. The second is that her subjectivity has become too powerful, too conspicuous to be safely contained within the patriarchal structure. As soon as she gives it a chance, the masculine logic re-establishes itself, and takes vengeance by publicly humiliating her. The contradictory aspects of Helena's subjectivity — its dependence on and transcendence over the patriarchal authority — have intermingled to fail her.

When Bertram deserts her, Helena seems drawn back to her initial state of obsession with death. She calls Bertram by his public title twice (3.2.101; 120), and by doing so she 'withdraw[s] any private claims or any proprietary interest, and give[s] back to Bertram his independence and his important public status'.⁹⁾ She masochistically blames herself for endangering Bertram:

Whoever shoots at him, I set him there;
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 was so effected. (3.2.112–6)

However, a few echoes of her previous speeches make Helena's remark ambiguous. As she has talked about Bertram's 'arched brows, his hawking eye, [and] his curls' (1.1.94), she now mentions '[t]hose tender limbs' of Bertram's (3.2.104). Her reference to 'the sportive court, where thou / Wast shot at with fair eyes' (3.2.106–7) reminds the audience of her day-dreaming in which Bertram has been made an ideal courtier (1.1.166–75). And finally, she expresses a wish for death in the same

animal imagery as in 1.1.91–2:

Better 'twere
I met the ravin lion when he roar'd
With sharp constraint of hunger; (3.2.116–8)

Here her fear of Bertram's death is replaced by her wish to die — to die metaphorically, as well as literally. The tone of Helena's speech here is reminiscent of that of her first soliloquy. She articulates her love in a succession of negatives, and still idealises Bertram. This is in fact hardly surprising. Bertram's rejection torments her, but the anguish only strengthens her desire. As her predecessor puts it, 'even for that do I love you the more' (*MND*, 2.1.202).

Helena's couplet expressing her resolution to 'steal away' concludes the first half of *All's Well*. This is, I think, one of the best manifestations of Shakespeare's superb technique in the two-part structure. While Helena's determination to leave Rossillion gives us some sense of ending to the major event of the action so far, the ambiguities of her speech make us anticipate a new turn of the action — a turn by virtue of which, if we can rely on the title of the play, all ends well. In the next section, I discuss this new turn, that is to say, the controversial employment of the bed trick.

3. Helena's New Stratagem

The first half of *All's Well* ends with Helena's determination to leave Rossillion, and in the second half, her resolution is repeated in the form of a letter addressed to the Countess (3.4.4–17). However, this does not necessarily mean that she has given up Bertram as she implies. She says that she will go on a pilgrimage to 'Saint Jaques'. The exact location of the shrine of Saint Jaques has troubled critics of the play, and some insist that Helena, knowing that Bertram is in Florence, follows him there. Others think that it is by providential coincidence that she finds herself where Bertram is.¹⁰⁾ Both views are justifiable to some extent, for Shakespeare seems to leave Helena's intention deliberately ambiguous. The point is, then, not to guess what Helena's real intent is from the flimsy,

contradictory information that the text gives, but to seek to understand why it is left ambivalent.

Perhaps the ambivalence can best be explained if we see it as a reflection of Helena's own uncertainty. Whether Florence is really on the way from Rossillion to Saint Jaques, and what is Helena's real intention — these matters are not made clear because Helena is not sure herself. As Neely suggests, '[p]erhaps these matters are as unclear to her as to the audience; she only knows that she wants to die for Bertram'.⁽¹¹⁾

When Helena meets the Florentine women, she learns from them that Bertram is 'bravely taken' there and that Parolles '[r]eports but coarsely of her' (3.5.52; 56–7). Her reaction to this news is the idealisation of Bertram and the self-abnegation characteristic of her:

O, I believe with him [i.e. Parolles].
In argument of praise, or to the worth
Of the great count himself, she is too mean
To have her name repeated. (3.5.58–61)

However, what she says next is astonishingly self-assertive:

All her deserving
Is a reserved honesty, and that
I have not heard examin'd. (3.5.61–3)

It may not be not going too far if we detect in Helena's strong self-assertiveness some sense of anger towards Parolles, whom she has thought to be on her side (1.1.188–9; 2.4.14–8). And what is significant here is that her love of Parolles has been indissolubly connected with her idealisation of Bertram: she has loved Parolles for Bertram's sake, though she knows he is an obnoxious character (1.1.99–100). As the colloquy with Parolles has empowered Helena, so here again Parolles plays the role of a catalyst, this time rather negatively. Parolles's denigration of Helena makes her realise, though perhaps only unconsciously, how idealised her vision of Bertram has been. When the Widow hints at Bertram's misbehaviour in Florence, Helena is surprisingly quick to understand what she means: 'Maybe the amorous count solicits her / In the

unlawful purpose?' (3.5.69–70) Here we hear for the first time Helena describe Bertram in negative terms. She seems to have taken the first step out of the idealisation of Bertram through her disillusionment with Parolles. At the same time, however, the idealisation is so deeply rooted in her that she still defends the idealised image of Bertram by ascribing his negative aspect to Parolles. The following dialogue between Helena and Diana may be read as the transferred expression of Helena's own view of Bertram and Parolles. In reply to Helena's questions, Diana describes Bertram as 'a most gallant fellow', 'a handsome gentleman', and Parolles as 'that same knave / That leads him to these places' (3.5.78–83).

Although Helena still idealises Bertram, a glance at his negative aspect, displaced to Parolles, seems to have endowed her with some practicality. She decides to make use of the amorous count's unlawful purpose:

Please it this matron and this gentle maid
To eat with us to-night, the charge and thanking
Shall be for me, and to requite you further,
I will bestow some precepts of this virgin
Worthy the note. (3.5.97–101)

What the speech makes clear at once is that Helena has already contrived the bed trick as a means to trap Bertram. As we have seen, her initial attempt to win Bertram has failed because of its dependence on paternal authority and because she has tried to extract love by translating her 'merit' into the too visible power of the King. In her second trial, she does not try to win Bertram by 'showing': she translates her subjectivity into an invisible *nothing* — the nothing of absence, the nothing of the darkness of night, and the nothing of death.

Thus, in the second half of the play, Helena retires into the background of the action. As she disappears, other characters begin to idealise her, and their idealisation leads G. K. Hunter to regard the Helena of the second half as a passive heroine, who is 'virtuous, pious, and patient till Destiny and Justice work things out for her'.⁽¹²⁾ However, when we do see Helena, she appears as a schemer. As soon as she hears that Bertram

is solicitous to seduce Diana, she quickly plots the bed trick. When we see her next, she is persuading the Widow with a 'purse of gold' and a promise of more money to help her (3.7.14; 34 - 6). Far from being passive, then, Helena actively takes advantage of the situation she finds herself in. Retreating into a marginal place, she exercises subjective control over the situation. Her new scheme is to assume the cognitive position through absence or under the disguise of female powerlessness.

At the same time, however, Helena is not really a headlong schemer, either. Concluding the scene, she says:

Why then to-night
 Let us assay our plot, which if it speed,
 Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed,
 And lawful meaning in a lawful act,
 Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact.
 But let's about it. (3.7.43-8)

The loaded ambiguities of the passage seem to reflect Helena's own internal conflict. Malone straightens up the passage by attributing 'wicked meaning' and 'a sinful fact' to Bertram's side, and 'lawful meaning' to Helena's.¹³⁾ Such a neat reading, logical as it is, spoils, rather than clarifies, the complex alternation of 'wicked', 'lawful' and 'sinful'. Although she persuades herself that her intention is 'lawful', her internalised sense of female submissiveness makes her wonder if her scheme is not 'sinful'. She also wants to defend Bertram by transforming his 'wicked meaning' into 'a lawful deed', but her defence seems to fail, for the force of 'and yet' makes 'a sinful fact' stand out from her preceding argument.¹⁴⁾ She needs to energise herself and cut herself from these vicissitudes by saying 'But' in order to declare her will to carry out her scheme.

Incidentally, the Duke's description of the bed trick in *Measure for Measure* completely lacks such hesitation as that of Helena's. He simply says: 'by this [i.e. the trick] is your brother sav'd, your honor untainted, the poor Mariana advantag'd, and the corrupt deputy scal'd' (*MM*, 3.1.253-5). Although he also talks about the 'falsehood' of the trick (*MM*, 3.2.281), his

concern seems solely with the practical outcome of the bed substitution and not with its moral ambiguities.

4. Two Scenarios: Helena's Success and/or Failure

With the force of 'let's about it' (3.7.48), Helena encourages herself and executes the bed trick. Helena conceals her subjective choice of Bertram in the darkness of night, and finally succeeds in making Bertram consummate their marriage. Instead of displaying her subjectivity as in her first attempt, she turns herself into the impersonal object of Bertram's desire. The impersonality of the bed trick is emphasised by the injunction to Bertram given by Diana (who, presumably, has received it from Helena) that he not stay in her chamber more than an hour and that he not speak (4.2.56-8). This is in marked contrast with the source story, where the affair is repeated with affectionate words (151).

At the same time, however, Helena has to pay the cost of her accomplishment. In order to adjust her sexuality to the logic governing the darkness of the bed trick, she has to, in a sense, prostitute herself. Helena herself expressly reveals her sense of loss:

But O, strange men,
 That can such sweet use make of what they hate,
 When saucy trusting of the cozen'd thoughts
 Defiles the pitchy night; so lust doth play
 With what it loathes for that which is away—
 (4.4.21-5)

What is exposed here is perhaps more profound than a patriarchal double standard, where male infidelity is tolerated while women are severely punished if they stray. It reveals the fundamental paradox of sexuality, for not only Bertram's, but Helena's lust 'plays with what it idealises for that which is away'. Sexuality may seem solid reality, but it is perhaps always something illusory. It is at this point that Helena finally stops idealising Bertram. She throws away her characteristic masochism, and begins to grope for a way to develop a new relationship with Bertram. As if encouraging herself, Helena says to Diana:

But with the word the time will bring on summer,
 When briars shall have leaves as well as thorns,
 And be as sweet as sharp. (4.4.31-3)

Somewhere between the two extreme views of Bertram, Helena tries to locate the real Bertram, who has 'leaves as well as thorns', and is 'as sweet as sharp'. Her idealised image of Bertram has been severely damaged, but the damage is the necessary price she must pay to negotiate a relationship with Bertram as he really is.

When the bed trick has been implemented, Helena gives the Florentine women further instructions (4.4.26-8). Now she needs the King's authority to validate her success in the bed trick, but instead of depending on it, as in her first attempt, this time she chooses to outwit it, as it were, by making herself absent through a mock death and by making Diana her agent. This is an extension of her strategy in the bed trick, where she has concealed her subjectivity in the darkness of night.

On the other hand, patriarchal authority has its own scenario to end the play. The King, the Countess and Lafew intend to stage a great show of reconciliation to accept Bertram, and hence to conclude the play. Lafew proposes the marriage between his daughter and Bertram. The sudden mention of Lafew's daughter and her absence from the stage underlines the mechanical nature of this proposed marriage.¹⁵ It is represented as a formal, almost political, marriage, being a product of the mutual concern of the two parties: the older generation need Bertram to take their place for the perpetuation of society, and Bertram needs to be accepted by them so that he can fully establish his manhood. Then Lavatch announces the arrival of Bertram: the scenario is perfect, and the actors are ready to proceed.

The King is more than willing to forgive Bertram: he is even ready to forget what he has done (5.3.20-5). Facing approaching death, the older generation has an urgent need to retrieve Bertram for their society:

All is whole,
 Not one word more of the consumed time.
 Let's take the instant by the forward top;

For we are old, and on our quick'st decrees
 Th' inaudible and noiseless foot of time
 Steals ere we can effect them. (5.3.37-42)

On his part, Bertram also knows what his role is. He asks for the King's pardon in spite of the King's words, and expresses his readiness to accept the second match, at the same time lamenting the death of his first wife. Here, in a sense, the older generation and Bertram together repeat Bertram's easy process of mourning ('I ... have buried a wife, mourn'd for her' [4.3.87-8]), though in much graver terms. Now the older generation is ready not only to forget Bertram's offence, but to forget Helena: 'Be this sweet Helen's knell, and now forget her' (5.3.67), and the marriage between Bertram and Lafew's daughter is contracted. Bertram gives Lafew a ring, which Bertram believes he has received from Diana, as a token of the engagement, but this ring is to prevent the play from ending in the way the older generation and Bertram want it to end.

As soon as the scenario of reconciliation breaks down, the King describes the ring as a sign of his paternal protection of Helena:

This ring was mine, and when I gave it Helen,
 I bade her, if her fortunes ever stood
 Necessitated to help, that by this token
 I would relieve her. (5.3.83-6)

Throughout the following confusions, the King repeatedly claims that he himself is the one that knows the trace of the transmission of the ring. In other words, by asserting his cognitive position as to the very ring that has brought about all these confusions, the King tries to re-establish his control over the situation. However, while the King's knowledge about the ring leads him to charge Bertram with the murder of Helena, the audience knows that Bertram has not in fact killed Helena, and that her mock death is a part of her plan. The King's insistence on the cognitive position only serves to underline the fact that he has been kept in the dark.

When Diana is brought on stage to confront Bertram, the King seems to welcome her, expecting that

she will confirm his own view of the situation. However, the result does not meet his expectation. The confrontation between Diana=the absent Helena and Bertram is soon replaced by that between the absent Helena and the King, and, as we might expect, their opposition centres around Helena's ring:

King. This ring you say was yours?
 Dia. Ay, my good lord.
 King. Where did you buy it? Or who gave it to you?
 Dia. It was not given me, nor I did not buy it.
 King. Who lent it you?
 Dia. It was not lent me neither.
 King. Where did you find it then?
 Dia. I found it not.
 King. If it were yours by none of all these ways, How could you give it him?
 Dia. I never gave it him.
 (5.3.270-6)

The important point to notice is that Diana, appropriate to her role as Helena's agent, evades the King's interrogation by using negatives. This seems to reflect Helena's overall scheme to remain in the cognitive position but under the disguise of absence.

The confrontation between the King and Helena (using Diana as her agent) is, to use a meta-theatrical term, a competition over the directorship of the drama. The patriarchal structure, represented by the King, has its own scenario to end the play, but a female subject imposes another ending 'to her own liking'. She can reveal her scheme to the women in the play, but not to the men, for if she does, her subjectivity will be denied as in her initial failure. When she appears at last to solve all confusions, Helena still insists that she is 'but the shadow of a wife' and 'not the thing' (5.3.307-8). She does not reveal her entire scheme of the bed trick until she wins from Bertram the promise that he will love her. Even then, she gives only a promise to explain everything after the end of the play. Paradoxically speaking, the play can end at all only by pushing its ending out of its own action. Helena's speech here exposes the paradox that she can exercise her

subjectivity only by exercising it in the darkness.

Therefore, Helena defers the end till the King ends the play. When the King does end the play, however, he still insists that he know everything:

Let us from point to point this story know,
 To make the even truth in pleasure flow.
 (5.3.325-6)

What might happen when he knows everything is suggested in his offer of a dowry to Diana:

If thou beest yet a fresh uncropped flower,
 Choose thou thy husband and I'll pay thy dower,
 (5.3.327-8)

It is obvious that this is a repetition of Helena's first choice. If the patriarchal structure knows anything, it will soon re-establish its control over female sexuality. *All's Well* thus ends with a premonition of authority's revival.

There is only foreboding of renewal of the patriarchal authority in *All's Well*, but in *Measure for Measure*, it is explicit. Although the play's action develops around Angelo's degeneration, and the Duke does anticipate it, the Duke's primary concern seems with re-energising his weakened authority:

We have strict statutes and most biting laws
 (The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds),
 Which for this fourteen years we have let slip,
 Even like an o'ergrown lion in a cave,
 That goes not out to prey. (*MM*, 1.3.19-23)

The Duke's intention is to revive these 'o'ergrown' (which I take to mean 'old', and not 'fat') laws. His strategy for achieving this is similar to that of Helena's in the second half of *All's Well*: to make himself absent and yet retain cognitive control of the situation. The Duke, by retiring into a marginal place at first and then claiming the central position, asserts his supreme authority at the end of the play.

The Duke in *Measure for Measure* unifies the roles of Helena and the King in *All's Well*. He has no need to

keep his subjectivity concealed as Helena does, since he himself is the patriarchal authority figure. Although both the Duke and Helena stage elaborate endings, their purposes are precisely opposite: while Helena's ending is contrived in order to disguise her subjectivity under female powerlessness, the Duke's is so organised as to impress his perfect control over the situation.

Consequently, there are no *if*'s and *seem*'s at the end of *Measure for Measure*. At the end of *All's Well*, the King insists on listening, but the Duke in *Measure for Measure* insists on informing instead: 'So bring us to our palace, where we'll show / What's yet behind that[s] meet you all should know' (5.1.538–9). The King's offer of a dowry resumes his patriarchal control over a female body, but even so, it perhaps stirs laughter among the audience because of its mechanical repetition. Duke Vincentio's reinforced control over female sexuality is direct and much more threatening to woman:

Dear Isabel,
I have a motion much imports your good,
Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,
What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine.
(5.1.534–7)

Surely it would be very hard — perhaps impossible — for Isabella to reject this coercive kindness. Even the swaying balance that empowers Helena is absent from this masculine show of authority.

Conclusion

Helena's success contains a fundamental paradox that she can remain a subject only as long as she exercises her subjectivity in the darkness. This seems to suggest a limitation of female subjectivity, however ingenious and strategic, within the patriarchal framework. If she should throw off her disguise of female powerlessness and reveal her aggressive subjectivity, her second attempt will fail like the first one. From this point of view, the epilogue, though assigned to the King, sounds more like the voice of Helena:

All is well ended, if this suit be won,
That you express content; (Epilogue, 2–3)

All is well only if the King and Bertram, and the audience, accept the apparent happiness of those on stage, without inquiring further how all actually is.

And yet, however limited it may be, Helena's strategy also suggests an important possibility of an way out from the hegemony of patriarchy. First by turning herself into the impersonal object of Bertram's desire, and then by concealing her cognitive manipulation under the guise of absence, she succeeds in making Bertram consummate their marriage and in winning his promise that he will love her. In the bed trick, she also learns a deep paradox of sexuality, and learns to love Bertram as he actually is. Helena thus registers a degree of success. Although the play ends with a premonition of authority's revival, the situation is much better than that in *Measure for Measure*. If *Measure for Measure* is a play that celebrates authority, *All's Well* suggests a strategy of intelligible subversion within the patriarchal system itself. *All's Well* tells us that assuming the disguise of powerlessness is not an impoverishing strategy, but an empowering one.

Notes

- (1) William Hazlitt, *Essays: The Round Table and Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (Ed. Ernest Rhys. London: J. M. Dent and Sons; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1936), 329. G. W. Knight, *The Sovereign Flower: On Shakespeare as the Poet of Royalism Together with Related Essays and Indexes to Earlier Volumes* (London: Methuen, 1958), 131 and 133.
- (2) Clifford Leech, 'The Theme of Ambition in *All's Well That Ends Well*' in *A Journal of English Literary History* 21 (1954): 17–29. 27.
- (3) A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns and Other Shakespeare Lectures* (Ed. Graham Storey. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961), 99–100; Rossiter's italics.
- (4) References to Shakespeare's works are to *The*

Riverside Shakespeare (Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974). Hereafter cited in the text.

- (5) Arthur Quiller-Couch and John Dover Wilson, ed., *All's Well That Ends Well* (1929. London: Cambridge UP, 1968), xxv.
- (6) The source story is reprinted in G. K. Hunter, ed., *All's Well That Ends Well* (1959. London: Methuen, 1967), 145–52; 147. Hereafter cited in the text.
- (7) Honigmann suggests that '[Lafew] wonders, "Do all they deny her?": they respond politely, not enthusiastically, partly because the parade offends the dignity of the male' (*All's Well That Ends Well: A "Feminist" Play?* in *Shakespeare Criticism* 13 [1991]: 77–83), 80. From this point of view, to see Lafew's comments in an either-correct-or-wrong way may be said to be beside the point. Carol Rutter's 'Helena's Choosing: Writing the Couplets in a Choreography of Discontinuity (*All's Well That Ends Well* 2.3)' in *Shakespeare Criticism* 19 (1993) suggests that Shakespeare's dramatic technique here is 'more Brecht than Brecht':
- Lafew is an alienation device talking *out* of the scene, providing for the audience he is addressing an alternative reading of the scene they are seeing. It is a reading that expresses the dominant culture's anxiety about the scene in progress, the role reversing female choosing her mate, even as it *supresses* that anxiety. (117; Rutter's italics)
- (8) See my earlier reading of *All's Well* in 'Masculine Claustrophobia and the Bed Trick: A Psychoanalytic Reading of *All's Well That Ends Well*' (*Reading* 15 [1995]: 13–21).
- (9) Barbara Everett, in a note to her edition of *All's Well* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 188.
- (10) For the former view, see, for example, Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Comedies* (London: Oxford UP, 1960), 164. One of the latter group, G. W. Knight insists that 'we must

not suppose that her finding him in Florence [is] part of a deliberate plan' (*The Sovereign Flower*, 143)

- (11) Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), 72. See also her discussion about the sonnet form of Helena's letter to the Countess (72–3).
- (12) G. K. Hunter, in Introduction to his edition of *All's Well*, xxxii. (See note 6 above.)
- (13) Quoted in G. K. Hunter, ed., *All's Well*, 95.
- (14) Barbara Hodgdon, 'Making of Virgins and Mothers: Sexual Signs, Substitute Scenes and Doubled Presences in *All's Well That Ends Well*' in *Philological Quarterly* 66 (1987): 47–71. 58–9.
- (15) In *Measure for Measure*, Mariana's arbitrary appearance has the same kind of mechanicality. Janet Adelman, in 'Bed Tricks: On Marriage as the End of Comedy in *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*' in Norman N. Holland, Sidney Homan and Bernard J. Paris, ed., *Shakespeare's Personality* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989), suggests that Mariana is 'introduced into the plot only when the bed trick needs her; she never becomes a fully realized figure' (167). The Duke in *Measure for Measure* and the elders in *All's Well* require their respective woman to end the play in the way they want it to end.