

# All's Well That Ends Well

## Study Guide

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For

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## Original Practice and Playing Shakespeare

The Shakespeare Tavern on Peachtree Street is an Original Practice Playhouse. Original Practice is the active exploration and implementation of Elizabethan stagecraft and acting techniques.

For the Atlanta Shakespeare Company (ASC) at The New American Shakespeare Tavern this means every ASC production features hand-made period costumes, live, actor-generated sound effects, and live period music performed on period instruments in our Elizabethan playhouse. Our actors are trained to speak directly to the audience instead of ignoring the audience through the modern convention of acting with a “4<sup>th</sup> wall.”

You will experience all of this and more when you see ASC's All's Well.

## Who's Who in All's Well

### In the French Court

**Helena:** “Pretty ladie” and “Faire maid” She is the orphaned ward of the Countess and daughter of a doctor.

**Countess of Rossillion:** Mother of Bertram,  
Widowed.



**Bertram, Count of Rossillion:** “Bright particular star” or “proud, scornful boy” depending on who you ask! He is the son of the Countess.

**Parolles:** He “Goes backward when he fights” He is a soldier, and current companion of Bertram.

**Lord Lafew:** “Privileged of Antiquity” A retainer of the King, and long time friend to the Countess.

**The King Of France:** “At all times good”. He is old, and dying of a Fistula.

**Lord Dumaine:** French Courtier, looking forward to fighting in Italy.

**The other Lord Dumaine:** Brother of the first Dumaine. Friend of Bertram.

**Reynaldo, the Steward:** Butler to the Countess Rossillion.

**Clowne:** A “knave” and “poor fellow” Servant to the Countess Rossillion.

**The Old Count Rossillion:** Bertram’s recently deceased father. They looked remarkably alike and the elder Rossillion was a wonderful man.

**Gerard De Narbon:** Helena’s deceased father. An extraordinarily skilled physician, who left all his medicines and his skills to his daughter.

**A Gentle Stranger:** He helps Helena on her way back to Rossillion, by delivering a letter.

## In the Court of Florence, and the countryside of Italy

**The Duke of Florence:** Encourages his young nobles, including the Dumaine brothers, to fight in his war against Sienna.

**Widow:** Though her “estate is fallen, she is well-born”. Mother of Diana.

**Mariana:** Young housewife and friend of Diana.

**The Translator:** Up to no good with the Dumaine brothers

**Soldiers, Servants, Pages**

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### **The Story**

Our play begins at the country home of the Countess Rossillion. Her husband has just died and the new Count, her son Bertram, is leaving for the King of France's Court. Mom is upset and Lafew assures her that the King, her husband's dear friend, will protect Bertram from the war brewing between Florence and Sienna. They leave, and Helena is left alone. She is a commoner, and ward of the Countess. She loves Bertram so much that she doesn't remember her love for her father at all. Parrolles, soldier and scoundrel, enters and they banter back and forth about their low birth and various other funny subjects. Helena decides to take her fate into her own hands- "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie" and sets out to cure the King.

We travel to the French court and meet the King, old and terminally ill from a Fistula (deep, festering wound). He advises his young courtiers that he will not send any official troops to help the Duke Of Florence in his war against Sienna, but that any young lord of France that wishes to fight may do so. He waxes poetic and longwinded as he remembers his friendship with Bertram's father-the elder Rossillion was "brave and humble".

Back in the country, the Countess and the Clown exchange banter about Helena, love and the Clown's behavior. She also questions her Steward about Helena, and he reveals that he heard Helena profess her love for Bertram when she thought she was alone. The Countess speaks to Helena, and eventually gets her to confess "that before you and next unto high heaven I love your son"! This is a problem for Helena, since she is of low birth and he is a Lord. However, the Countess loves Helena and realizes she is good and pure, and a fine match for Bertram- if he can be worthy of her. She decides to help Helena to travel to the French Court.

Back in France, the King decides that Bertram will not be allowed to travel to Italy and fight. Bertram is upset and rather than behave, he decides to do as Parrolles says, and sneak away to the war.

Helena arrives at Court. Her "years, profession, wisdom and constancy hath amazed" Lafew and he is convinced the King's illness will be cured if only Helena can treat him. The King is not convinced at first but Helena's fine manner and firm belief in her mission convinces him. She tells him "if I break time or flinch in property of what I spoke, unpittied let me die". In other words, if I don't cure you, you may kill me. In return, if she does cure him "Thou shalt give me what husband in thy power I will command" They exit to begin treatment.

After a brief bit of foolery between the Countess and her Clown, we travel back to the French Court, where a miracle has taken place! The King is cured, he is "lustique" and able to "dance a corranto", all due to Helena. She refused the hands of 3 young lords before revealing her true choice, Bertram. He reacts angrily to the King's command and refuses to marry her. The King suggests to Bertram it is a mistaken belief that title and birth are more important than innate goodness and virtue. He suggests very strongly that Bertram change his mind. After the King threatens his life, Bertram does so and he and Helena are married. He parts from his new wife abruptly, refusing to consummate their marriage or even kiss her goodbye. He sends Helena back to his mother with letters and runs off to Florence with Parrolles.

Helena arrives home dispirited and the letter reveals how truly awful Bertram is behaving. He proclaims "till I have no wife, I have nothing in France". He will not return home until Helena is dead, divorced from him or gone. Furthermore, until "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" Helena quickly resolves to leave France and go on pilgrimage to St. Jaques. This leads her to Italy and she goes in search of her brat of a husband.

Back in Italy, a kind Widow, her daughter Diana and their friend Mariana are awaiting a parade of brave soldiers through their country town near Florence. We learn that Bertram has been courting Diana. Mariana says, "beware

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of them...and all these engines of lust". She thinks Parrolles is a knave, and Bertram cannot be much better. They meet Helena in her pilgrim guise and the Widow invites Helena to stay at her house.

Parrolles, meanwhile, has lost his ceremonial Drum, which the Duke of Florence entrusted to his care. Bertram and the Dumaine brothers decide to waylay Parrolles as he makes a lame attempt to recover the drum and trick him into betraying his fellow soldiers. The Dumaine brothers are disappointed in Bertram's behavior towards his wife and blame it on Parrolles influence. If they can convince Bertram of Parrolles cowardice, they can reform Bertram. We also learn that everyone believes Helena has died while on pilgrimage.

Helena, meanwhile, knows the only way to get Bertram to be a husband to her is by trickery. She encourages Diana to invite Bertram home for a midnight rendezvous. However, instead of the virtuous Diana, Helena will be under the bedclothes, and Bertram will unknowingly consummate his marriage with Helena, thinking it is Diana he has won. Diana meets with Bertram and demands his family ring, as token of their coming night together. She in turn promises him another ring after he has lain with her. That ring, however, will be the ring Helena won of the King when she cured him.

Parrolles falls in with the disguised soldiers and true to his nature reveals all!!

Bertram returns to his home in France. Helena, now in possession of his ring (one part of the impossible quest) returns with Diana, Widow and Mariana in tow. The King, Lafew and the Countess quickly mourn Helena's supposed death and decide that Bertram must now wed Lafew's daughter (whom we never meet). Things wrap up quickly when Bertram is discovered to have Helena's ring and is suspected of having a hand in her death. Then Diana shows up, spouting riddles and demanding Bertram wed her. All is explained when Helena appears and proclaims that the impossible demands put upon her to win Bertram's love, have all been accomplished.

She reveals not only that she have his ring, she is also pregnant by him. He quickly realizes she has won and kneels to her, expressing his devotion. All's well that ends well, apparently, as the King, Helena (now Countess in her own right) and the Old Countess go off, to celebrate. Parrolles, scorned and abused, and Bertram, who may have learned a lesson, remain onstage as the lights go dark.

### **Before a Performance, Think About This:**

#### **Physical Actions Revealed:**

Suit the deed to the word, the word to the deed. Where are there examples of the text itself telling the reader what the physical action on stage could be? Look at Act I, scene iii, the Countess' words to Helena "this distempered messenger of wet" and Act II, scene iii, when Bertram says "pardon, my gracious lord, for I submit"

#### **Theatergoing Then and Now:**

Find out what the typical Elizabethan audience was like and imagine what a performance might have been like back then. What is different about theatre going nowadays? The answers may surprise you! Clue: What would this play be like to watch outside, in the light of day?

### **During a Performance, Watch And Listen For This:**

The King explains that while a person may be lowly born, that doesn't mean they are unworthy of love and respect. Listen for when the King says "From lowest place, whence virtuous things proceed, the place is dignified by th' doers deed"

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### **After a Performance, Talk About This:**

#### **Status and the Elizabethan World:**

What was the traditional role of a King, a Lord, a Countess, a commoner or a servant in Elizabethan society? When could someone step outside the normal bounds of their lot in life and gain (or lose) everything? Who loses the most by the end of the play? Who gains the most? How do traditional roles change? How does each character change?

#### **Original Practice Theatre:**

Does directly addressing the audience affect what you think and feel about the characters? Does it affect your understanding of what is going on onstage? Does it interfere? Why do you think Shakespeare wrote his plays this way? What are the benefits to the actor and/or audience? What are the risks?

#### **Words Invented by Shakespeare and Used for the First Time In this play:**

Inaudible  
Noiseless  
Radiance  
Threateningly  
Transcendence

Find for yourself where they appear in the play! Can you spot them in performance? Do they mean what you thought they meant?

#### **For Further Information/Exploration:**

##### **Websites:**

Mr. William Shakespeare and The Internet: <http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/>- this site contains excellent resources and is a great metasite.

The Shakespeare Globe Centre USA: <http://www.shakespeareglobeusa.org/>

##### **Books:**

The Elizabethan World Picture by E.M.W. Tilyard

Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human by Harold Bloom

Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare by Isaac Asimov

Staging In Shakespeare's Theatres by Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa

Shakespeare A to Z by Charles Boyce

##### **Our performance text is:**

The Applause First Folio of Shakespeare in Modern Type, Neil Freeman

For more information on the First Folio of Shakespeare go to:

<http://web.uvic.ca/shakespeare/Annex/DraftTxt/index.html>

##### **Definitions of Words Invented for All's Well**

Inaudible: Not heard, incapable of being heard.

Noiseless: Silent, without sound.

Radiance: Brilliant light; splendor

Threateningly: Menacingly

Transcendence: Surpassing quality

##### **One final discussion:**

This play is one of the few in Shakespeare's Canon that actually quotes the name of the play in the text. Can you guess one other one? Email [laura@shakespearetaVERN.com](mailto:laura@shakespearetaVERN.com) for the answer!