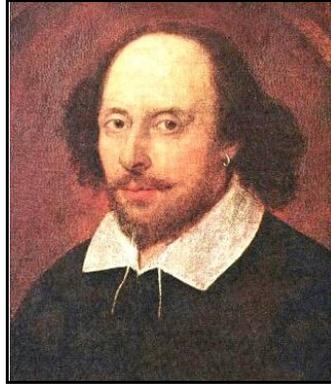


ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

by William Shakespeare



THE AUTHOR

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into the family of a prosperous tradesman in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. While in his mid-teens, he was forced to leave school because his family fell into a period of poverty, so that he had only a rudimentary education. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and already three months pregnant. The marriage produced three children in three years, but in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford to go to London to seek his fortune in the big city.

In London, he embarked upon a career on the stage, becoming a popular actor by the early fifteen nineties. Around 1590, he penned his first plays; *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Comedy of Errors* are both candidates for his initial effort. His early plays were comedies, and show nothing of the depth that characterized his later works. His plots were borrowed from a variety of sources, both ancient and contemporary. During his career, he wrote 37 plays, three narrative poems, and 154 sonnets.

His writing brought him fame and popularity, but he continued to act as well as write (critics love to speculate about which of the characters in his plays would have been played by the author). He eventually became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men when James I ascended the throne). Most of his plays were performed at local theaters like the Rose, the Globe, and the indoor Blackfriars. When the Globe burned to the ground in 1613 (a cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII*), Shakespeare retired, and died in Stratford three years later on his fifty-second birthday.

The dates of composition and initial performance of *All's Well That Ends Well* are unknown, but most scholars believe that it was written sometime between 1602 and 1604. The plot is loosely derived from a story by Boccaccio. The play itself is considered one of Shakespeare's weaker efforts because of the comparatively low level of its poetry, the distasteful nature of the central male character, and some of the more unsavory elements found in the plot. Furthermore, the play incorporates a variety of devices used earlier in Shakespeare's work - the ring trick, reminiscent of that in *The Merchant of Venice* (1597), the bed trick from *Measure for Measure* (1604), the "trial" of Parolles, similar to the torment visited upon Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (1600), and the "death" of the heroine, like that of Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1599).

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Bertram - The newly-appointed Count of Rossillion, he is forced to marry Helena against his will by the King of France and determines never to consummate the marriage. She eventually wins him by trickery, taking Diana's place in bed when Bertram tries to seduce her.
- Countess of Rossillion - Bertram's mother, she is recently widowed. She does everything she can to advance Helena's cause with her son.
- Lafew - An old nobleman serving the Countess, he often engages in wordplay at the expense of Lavatch and Parolles.
- Lavatch - A clown in the Countess' household.
- King of France - He is seriously ill and has suffered much at the hands of many physicians, but Helena uses her father's remedy to heal him, after which he promises her the hand of any of his nobles she should choose.
- Duke of Florence - When Bertram, along with other French nobles, volunteers to join his army, he makes him the captain of his cavalry.
- Parolles - A companion of Bertram, he is a fool and scoundrel who leads Bertram into a life of vice and rivals Falstaff in his cowardice in battle.
- Helena - The orphaned daughter of the Countess' physician, she is in love with Bertram and is given him as husband by the King of France. He then deserts her with no intention of ever seeing her again, but she devises a clever plot to win his love.
- Diana - Daughter of the Widow Capilet of Florence, Bertram tries to seduce her, but Helena takes her place in bed and as a result gets pregnant by her own husband.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Be thou blest, Bertram, and succeed thy father
In manners, as in shape. Thy blood and virtue
Contend for empire in thee, and thy goodness
Share with thy birthright. Love all, trust a few,
Do wrong to none. Be able for thine enemy
Rather in power than in use, and keep thy friend
Under thy own life's key. Be checked for silence,
But never taxed for speech. What heaven more will,
That thee may furnish, and my prayers pluck down,
Fall on thy head!” (Countess, II, 56-65)

“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.” (Helena, Ii, 208-211)

“He that of greatest works is finisher
Oft does them by the weakest minister.
So holy writ in babes hath judgment shown
When judges have been babes; great floods have flown
From simple sources, and great seas have dried
When miracles have by the greatest been denied.” (Helena, Iii, 136-141)

“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.’” (Bertram, IIIii, 56-59)

“The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together; our virtues would be proud
if our faults whipped them not, and our crimes would despair if they were not cherished by
our virtues.” (Second Lord, IViii, 66-69)

“All’s well that ends well yet,
Though time seem so adverse and means unfit.” (Helena, Vi, 25-26)

NOTES

Act I, scene 1 - The play begins in the palace of the Count of Rossillion, recently deceased. His widow, the Countess, is saying farewell to her son Bertram, now the Count, who has been summoned to the court of the King of France. The King is ill with a fistula, and the Countess regrets that her physician, Gerard de Norbon, is no longer living; in fact, he has left his only daughter, Helena in the Countess’ care. Lafew, an elderly retainer of the Countess, is to accompany Bertram to Paris. When the Countess, Bertram, and Lafew exit, Helena opens her heart about her love for Bertram, whom she considers beyond the reach of a mere physician’s daughter. As she mourns Bertram’s departure, Parolles enters; he is a follower of Bertram, but is a fool, a liar, and a coward. The two banter for a time on the subject of virginity, then Parolles leaves to join Bertram in his journey to Paris. Helena, meanwhile, is contemplating a scheme to use the King’s illness and her knowledge of her father’s medical skills to her own advantage.

Act I, scene 2 - The scene now moves to the palace of the King of France in Paris. The King receives word that Florence and Siena are at war and that the Florentines will soon ask for his assistance. He determines to remain neutral, but will allow his courtiers to fight for either side should they choose to do so. Bertram and his companions then arrive and the King praises Bertram’s father, by whose side he had fought in his youth. He mourns his sickness and infirmity, but welcomes Bertram as a son.

Act I, scene 3 - Back at the palace in Rossillion, the Countess and her steward listen as Lavatch the clown begs her permission to get married. Banter ensues, and the Countess sends Lavatch to summon Helena. After the clown leaves, the steward tells the Countess that Helena is in love with Bertram. She says she suspected as much, and holds the doctor's daughter in high regard. When Helena arrives, the Countess assures her that she loves her like a daughter, and Helena wishes that she could be the Countess' daughter in fact if only she would not at the same time be Bertram's sister. The Countess understands the cause of the wordplay and demands to know in plain language whether or not Helena loves her son. She admits that she does, and the Countess pledges her support to bring about the desired union. The plan is hatched; Helena is to go to Paris bearing her father's remedy for the King's ailment, and there win the love of Bertram.

Act II, scene 1 - The scene again moves to Paris, where the King is bidding farewell to his lords who are leaving to fight in the Florentine war. He has forbidden Bertram to go because of his youth and Parolles has chosen to stay behind because of his cowardice, but Bertrand, determined to share in the glory of battle, decides to slip out with the departing nobles. After they leave, Lafew enters and begs the King to admit a young female doctor who is able to cure his ills. After suffering much at the hands of many physicians, however, he has given up hope of a cure and is reluctant to try any more remedies. Lafew convinces him, however, and he agrees to see Helena. When she tells him of her father's treatment, he expresses his respect for him but refuses to be treated by her, since all previous efforts of the greatest men of medicine in France have failed. She perseveres, however, and promises to heal him within two days, even at the risk of her life. Finally a bargain is struck: if the King dies, Helena forfeits her life, but if the cure is successful, the King will grant her any husband she chooses within his kingdom.

Act II, scene 2 - The next scene brings us back to the palace at Rossillion, where the Countess is sending Lavatch to Paris with a message for Helena. She is uncertain that the clown is up to the task, but he assures her that he is prepared for any eventuality and has the answer for every question: "O Lord, sir!"

Act II, scene 3 - Back in Paris again, we find Bertram, Lafew, and Parolles; the latter two are bantering back and forth, completing one another's sentences. Soon the King enters with Helena. She has succeeded in curing him and he is preparing to grant her request to marry any noble of her choosing. He brings his young bachelor lords before her, but she rejects them all until she gets to Bertram, whom she designates as her future husband. Bertram, however, has no interest in marrying a lowborn doctor's daughter. The King chastises him for rejecting a lovely lady of high character simply because she is of low birth and even offers to raise her to noble status and provide a dowry, but Bertram still refuses. Finally the King threatens him with all loss of royal favor and he reluctantly agrees, after which the King sets the nuptials for that very night. After a brief exchange of insults between Lafew and Parolles, Bertram enters, now a married man. He is clearly bitter about being forced into an undesired union and is determined never to sleep with his wife, but to send her home to his mother, making clear his hatred for her, and leave immediately for the Florentine wars.

Act II, scene 4 - Both Lavatch and Parolles come to Helena carrying messages, the one from the Countess and the other from Bertram. The Countess continues to grieve for her husband, and Bertram insists that Helena bid farewell to the King and await his pleasure.

Act II, scene 5 - Bertram intends to take Parolles with him to the wars, but Lafew advises him not to trust such a man. When Helena enters, Bertram tells her to leave immediately for home and gives her a letter for his mother. After she leaves, he tells his men that he intends never to go home again.

Act III, scene 1 - The action now moves to the palace of the Duke of Florence. He is speaking to two young French nobles, wondering why the King refused to send troops to support him. They have no idea, but he thanks them for their help and promises them honors as they prepare for battle.

Act III, scene 2 - Back in Rossillion, the Countess is pleased to hear about the marriage but disappointed that her son has not returned with his new bride, and furious when she finds that he has run away to the wars with no intention of ever returning. Helena's letter from her husband cruelly tells her that he will never be hers unless she can get the ring from his finger that will never come off (because it is a family heirloom) and bear a child of whom he is the father, which he swears will never happen. The Countess thinks her son a fool and is ready to disown him in favor of Helena, but Helena is overwhelmed with guilt, believing that it is all her fault if Bertram dies in the war. She decides that because she is the impediment that keeps Bertram from returning home, she will slip away secretly.

Act III, scene 3 - In Florence, the Duke appoints Bertram as the head of his cavalry and he prepares to go into battle.

Act III, scene 4 - The Countess finds the letter Helena left behind in her flight, indicating that she intends to take a barefoot pilgrimage to the shrine of St. James of Compostela in Spain. The Countess sends a letter to her son telling him of the noble sacrifice of his wife and pleading with him to return home. She then hopes to retrieve Helena after Bertram comes back.

Act III, scene 5 - A Florentine widow and her daughter Diana, along with other citizens, discuss the great victory won by Bertram. They also comment on his vile companion Parolles, who has attempted to seduce any maiden he has encountered. While they talk, a pilgrim approaches; Helena is a long way from Compostela. The widow invites Helena to stay in her home and tells her about the exploits of the young French count. The city is full of gossip about his unfortunate marriage, but the widow questions his character because he has attempted to seduce her daughter Diana. Helena thanks her for her hospitality and offers to give Diana some advice for how to deal with Bertram.

Act III, scene 6 - In the camp outside Florence, two French lords are trying to convince Bertram that Parolles is a scoundrel and a coward. They dream up a plan in which, when Parolles goes to retrieve his lost drum, Florentine soldiers will capture and blindfold him, take him into the Florentine camp, put him on trial and entice him to betray Bertram to save his life. Bertram meanwhile tells them about an attractive girl (Diana) who has been resisting his advances.

Act III, scene 7 - Helena has shared her true identity with the widow and revealed her plan. Diana is to submit to Bertram's entreaties, asking first for the ring he wears on his finger. Then Helena will take her place and consummate her marriage without her husband's knowledge. In return Helen gives the widow a bag of gold and promises more after the deed is done as a dowry for Diana.

Act IV, scene 1 - French lords outside the Florentine camp prepare to capture Parolles. The plan to speak gibberish to convince him they are part of a foreign army [but wouldn't the soldiers fighting for Siena speak Italian like the Florentines?]. When the scoundrel arrives, he is talking to himself, trying to come up with a plausible explanation for why he did not recover his drum. He decides to give himself wounds and report that he survived a fierce encounter with the enemy. At this point they begin to cry out nonsense, surround him and cover his eyes with a blindfold. Fearing for his life, he promises to reveal all the plans and secrets of the Florentine army if they will only spare him. They then lock him up in the stocks and send for Bertram.

Act IV, scene 2 - Bertram, meanwhile, is pursuing his seduction of Diana. He accuses her of being cold toward him, and she reminds him that he has a wife to whom he is trying to be unfaithful. She finally demands his ring in return for her favors. He refuses, arguing that the ring is the greatest honor of his house, but she tells him that her virtue is her greatest honor, and therefore worthy of such a gift. She tells him to come to her chamber at midnight, but to remain only an hour and on no occasion speak to her.

Act IV, scene 3 - As the French lords prepare to torment Parolles, they discuss their captain's dishonorable dalliance with the Florentine girl. They note, however, that he seems deeply affected by the letter he received from his mother. Not only that, but a peace has been negotiated and the war is therefore over. In addition, rumor has it that Helena died while on pilgrimage in Spain. What, they wonder, will Bertram do now? Soon word comes that he intends to return to France the following day.

When Bertram arrives, having conducted his various forms of business, they set about to deal with Parolles. Having been locked in the stocks for several hours, he has confessed to a supposed priest all his sins and misdeeds, which have been duly written down by his tormentors. Threatened with torture, he reveals all the details of the military strength of the Florentine army, then in response to questioning slanders the very officers who are conducting the charade. They also discover a letter he wrote to Diana warning her against the Count's lascivious desires, insisting that he will have his way with her but never pay what he promised. Finally the lords sentence him to death for treason against his own army, but he asks to have the blindfold removed so he could witness his own execution. They do so and he quickly realizes that he has been duped. All leave him in his humiliation, but he is beyond shame and determines henceforth to live by his wits.

Act IV, scene 4 - Back in the widow's house, Helena shares her intention to go to the King of France to secure his support, then return home to Rossillion before Bertram arrives. She asks Diana to go with her in order to help her carry out the rest of her plan.

Act IV, scene 5 - At the palace in Rossillion, Lafew and the Countess are mourning the supposed death of Helena. Lafew blames Bertram's despicable behavior on the influence of Parolles, but the Countess recognizes that he is to blame for his actions. Meanwhile Lafew has proposed to the King of France that his daughter marry Bertram in Helena's place. At this point Bertram and the King and his retainers are all en route to Rossillion, and at the end of the scene Bertram is seen in the distance.

Act V, scene 1 - Helena, Diana, and the widow arrive in Marseilles only to find that the King has already departed for Rossillion. Helena gives a letter for the King to a courtier who is likely to arrive at Rossillion before her, then the women mount and proceed to follow him.

Act V, scene 2 - Parolles arrives at Rossillion in deplorable condition, filthy and stinking, and gives Lavatch a letter for Bertram begging for his reinstatement. Lafew promises him that he will at least be given something to eat.

Act V, scene 3 - The King of France is now at Bertram's palace in Rossillion and assures the Countess that he has forgiven Bertram all his sins and follies. He is at this point prepared to marry Bertram to Lafew's daughter. The Count is penitent, confessing that he came to love Helena only when it was too late, and is fully willing to contract the new match required of him by the King. Bertram produces a ring, which Lafew, the King, and the Countess all swear they had seen on Helena. Bertram argues that this is impossible, since he had received the ring from a woman he bedded in Florence. The King then accuses Bertram of lying to cover up some violence he had done to Helena and orders him arrested. Shortly the gentleman from Marseilles arrives with a letter from Diana, imploring the King to grant justice by forcing her seducer to marry her. Lafew, on hearing this, withdraws the offer of his daughter's hand to Bertram. Diana and her mother arrive and confront Bertram, claiming her right as his wife, but the Count insists that he merely engaged in sport with her and made no promise of marriage. Diana swears that she is no common camp follower, and for proof produces the Count's ring, which the Countess immediately recognizes as the family heirloom. Bertram also admits that the ring he intended to give to Lafew's daughter had originally belonged to the woman he slept with in Florence. Diana refuses to say where she got the ring, and the King prepares to imprison her until she speaks all she knows. At this point Helena enters and all the riddles are solved. She has now demonstrated to Bertram that she could get the ring from his finger and carry his child, and he begs her forgiveness. The King then promises to pay the dowry that would allow Diana to marry any husband of her choosing.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Compare and contrast the tricks involving rings in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Consider the circumstances under which the rings are given and the motivations behind the chicanery involved. How do the tricks contribute to the "comic" nature of the two plays?
2. Compare and contrast the bed tricks in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Both pieces of deception are intended to preserve the virginity of virtuous women while forcing immoral men to sleep with those who rightly deserve their favors. Are these tricks justifiable? Why or why not?
3. William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Much Ado About Nothing* both make use of the plot device of faking the death of the heroine in order to reform the character of the hero. Compare and contrast the two plot devices in terms of motive, means, and consequences. Are these acts of deception justified? Why or why not?

4. Compare and contrast the torment visited upon Parolles in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* and that practiced upon Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Consider means, motives, and justifications in the two cases. Did both fools "have it coming"? Why or why not? How do the two incidents contribute to the respective plots of the two plays?
5. In William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, Parolles is a coward and a liar. Compare and contrast his characteristics with those of Falstaff in *Henry IV, part 2*. Consider their behavior in relationship to their words, both before and after their unmasking. Why is Falstaff so much more a sympathetic character than Parolles?
6. The advice given to Bertram by his mother in Act I, scene 1 of William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* bears some resemblance to Polonius' advice to his son Laertes in Act I, scene 3 of *Hamlet*. Compare and contrast the two, not only in content, but also in their settings in the play and the nature of the characters who give and receive the advice in question.
7. Discuss the concept of redemption as it is handled in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*. Focus on the redemption of Bertram. By what means does it come about? Do you find his transformation convincing? Why or why not?
8. Compare William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* with the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Consider the causes of Bertram's rebellion, its consequences, and the circumstances under which he is restored to his mother's good graces. Be sure to give attention also to the relationship between the Countess and the father in Jesus' story.
9. Analyze the character of Bertram in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*. What are his most important strengths and weaknesses? Does the fact that he is beloved by the noble Helena indicate that he may have more to him than meets the eye in the narrative?
10. Do the title of William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* and the way in which that title is brought to fruition indicate that the ends justify the means? What aspects of the play would support such a conclusion? Evaluate from a biblical standpoint the idea that one may do evil that good may result.
11. William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* is often considered a "dark comedy" or "problem play" because of its cynical view of human nature, unlikeable characters, and dubious "happy ending." Does the play deserve the criticism that it has often received because of these qualities? Why or why not? Consider the fact that modern drama prefers flawed characters because they contribute to greater realism.
12. William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* contains sharp contrasts between the older and younger generations. What positive and negative qualities define the King of France, the Countess, Lafew, and the Widow on the one hand and Bertram, Helena, and Diana on the other? Does Shakespeare leave the audience with hope for the future? Why or why not?

13. Discuss the view of the battle of the sexes portrayed in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*. Shakespeare's comedies and romances that result in marriage, and this one is no exception, but can the relationship between Bertram and Helena rightly be called romantic? In answering the question, consider the attitudes and behavior of the two principals, not only toward one another, but toward the opposite sex in general.
14. The action in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* takes place in three locations - Rossillion, Paris, and Florence. How do these settings influence the action of the play? How do characters behave differently in the three settings?
15. Discuss the role of social class in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*. Consider not only the class snobbery of Bertram in his attitude toward Helena and Diana, but also the examples of people who deem social class far less important than character.
16. Writers have the power to influence the morals of their audiences by creating scenarios in which the reader or viewer approves of immoral deeds. To what extent is this true in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*? Do you find yourself approving of the various deceptions that occur during the play in order to bring about the desired ending? Is this a good thing?
17. Write an essay speculating about what happens after the ending of William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*. Is Bertram indeed a changed man? Will he and Helena have a happy marriage? Be sure to cite indicators from within the play to support your speculations.
18. At one point in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helena describes her love for Bertram as idolatry. Is this an accurate description? Why or why not? Cite specifics from the play to support your arguments.
19. Some critics have suggested that Helena in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* serves as a Christ figure, the only one who can save the fallen Bertram. Evaluate this reading of the play. To what extent is it legitimate and to what extent is it not? Remember that no Christ figure, not even Aslan in *the Chronicles of Narnia*, provides a perfect parallel to Jesus, but that certain elements are essential in order for a character in a book or play to deserve such an appellation.
20. Some critics have suggested that William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* is a sort of anti-fairy tale, with a poor but virtuous maiden longing for the love of the unreachable prince and getting him in the end, but in the process violating all of the typical fairy-tale conventions, winding up looking more like Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* than anything by Hans Christian Andersen. Is Shakespeare's point that fairy tales are after all unreal, and that real life is far more complicated than those neat stories? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.

21. In Act I, scene 1 of William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helena says, "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." Later, in Act II, scene 1, she ascribes her ability to heal the King of France to divine providence: "He that of greatest works is finisher / Oft does them by the weakest minister. / So holy writ in babes hath judgment shown / When judges have been babes; great floods have flown / From simple sources, and great seas have dried / When miracles have by the greatest been denied." Does the play present God as the great mover behind the action or promote self-reliance? Use specifics from the play to support your arguments.

22. Evaluate the view of human nature and human life contained in these words by the Second Lord in Act IV, scene 3: "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together; our virtues would be proud if our faults whipped them not, and our crimes would despair if they were not cherished by our virtues." Be sure to use Scripture to assess the ideas presented here and support your arguments with specifics from the play.