

# Alabama Shakespeare Festival 2010 Activity Guide for



by William Shakespeare



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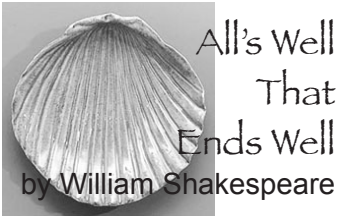
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## Working with ASF's *All's Well That Ends Well*

### Plot Summary

After his father, the Count Rossillion, dies, teenage Bertram goes to the court as the ward of the king, accompanied by a flamboyant "advisor," Parolles. The count's physician has also recently died, leaving his daughter Helena in the Countess's care. Helena loves Bertram but considers a match impossible. When she realizes her father left her a way to cure the ailing king's disease, she heads to court and cures the king, who gratefully lets her claim a husband.

She chooses Bertram, who rejects her as too low-born to be his wife. When the king orders him to marry her, he does, but then immediately runs away from court to the wars in Florence, swearing he will never be Helena's husband until she gets his family ring and has a child by him.

When Helena gets this rejection, she goes on a pilgrimage so Bertram can return home, but she shows up in Florence in time to intervene with Diana, the young woman Bertram is trying to seduce. Helena takes Diana's place at an assignation and gets Bertram's ring.

The other lords trick Parolles and show Bertram his friend is a fraud as Bertram heads home, thinking Helena is dead. Once there, he is offered another court marriage until he is confronted by Diana about his actions, which he denies until forced to confess. His behavior is made public and he is disgraced until Helena appears, pregnant and with his ring, to show that he simply consummated his marriage. "All yet seems well" at play's end.

### Note to Teachers:

These activities use various aspects of the play so you can choose how to get the most from your SchoolFest experience. Adapt them for discussion, writing, or improvised enactment based on the needs and abilities of your class. If your students do writing or art projects based on their SchoolFest experience, we are always interested in seeing their work: contact Greta Lambert at 334/271-5393.



*This is a pre-production advertising photo for All's Well using acting interns rather than the Equity actors, although Lauren Sowa (left) does actually play Diana. As an image for All's Well, what does it suggest the play emphasizes? If you saw this as an ad for a film, what would you expect the plot of the film to be?*

*Make your own single image ad for All's Well and justify your choices.*

### Pre-Show Activities

#### Discussion Topics

- Work with the definition of comedy (see study materials, p. 2), especially the idea of separation and reunion, in terms of family and social group. What issues can split or fuse a family or social group?
- Introduce the usual romantic comedy scenario—a young couple in love trying to be together against the objections of at least one blocking parent, usually a father—and contrast *All's Well's* scenario—two young people who are not a couple, not mutually in love, one forced on the other by the guardian/monarch with approval of the parent. Consider what may be different in this scenario in terms of relationship, action, and outcome.
- Consider the situation and reaction of a young woman in love with a guy who is much wealthier and of higher social status who does not seem to see her as more than a glorified servant. How does she feel? Should she pursue her love? What options does she have? What's on her side? What's against her?
- Consider the situation and reaction of a young man who suddenly finds a young woman, definitely his social inferior and someone he barely knows, forced on him as his wife by the king. How does he feel? What should he do? What are his options? How should he react?
- Consider anyone you know who tries to fit into a group he or she does not belong in. How does s/he try to maneuver a way in? How does s/he work to get others to accept him or her as a member of the group? Why would someone do this? What are the consequences?
- Discuss how much parents or adults should have a say in young people's relationships and to what extent young people should be free to make their own choices, even their own mistakes.

**Post-Show:** Discuss these topics in terms of Helena, Bertram, Parolles, the King and the Countess.



# All's Well That Ends Well

by William Shakespeare

ASF SchoolFest 2010/ 2

## Working with the Idea of Comedy

Looking at the famous plays in the canon, it might be easy to assume Shakespeare wrote only romantic comedies. Not so! He runs the gamut of comedy within his plays and in the course of his career.

### Things to Consider about Comedy

- The basic definition of comedy is structural: comedy looks at social groups—families, neighbors, friends, business allies—by first splitting them apart and then putting them back together again. In the splitting we see the issues and bonds of the society and of the relationships involved.
- Questions about individuals can reflect questions about society.
- The traditional responses of comedy are sympathy and ridicule. We laugh with or laugh at.

### For Discussion

- Decide who we laugh with and who we laugh at in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Do our responses to some characters change while responses to other characters stay the same? Who and why?

### Kinds of Comedy

**Farce** treats its characters almost like wind-up toys. The consequences are, interestingly, inconsequential; no one actually gets hurt. It is the lure of going beyond the normal social bounds that raises the stakes and sets the farcical dynamo in motion.

**Situation comedy** (sit com) relies on the familiar traits of known figures placed in a variety of scenarios, as in *I Love Lucy*, *Friends*, or *The Office*.

With **romantic comedy** we begin to know and care more about the emotions and thoughts of characters, for love's complications inspire and drive the action. Often the obstacles to the happiness of the young lovers are external, such as blocking fathers, but sometimes situational or individual.

**Comedy of ideas** adds a more didactic element, asking questions about society or challenging traditional values.

Lastly, **comedy of manners** looks at an entire social milieu or class and satirically anatomizes its mores, values, and behavior, as in Restoration comedy.

### Defining *All's Well*

Can we consider *All's Well* a romantic comedy? Is there a set of young lovers who try to overcome obstacles—or in this play is one of the young people the major obstacle? Can there be a romantic comedy without romance?

While love plays its part, the nature of that love is questioned on stage and off so that we see several definitions of love and several responses to it. We also see how maturation and marriage work in the larger society.

Parolles certainly seems to offer chances for situation comedy; his phony or wannabe status is made clear early on and then tested in a variety of circumstances and conversations.

*All's Well That Ends Well* also challenges very real people with genuine social issues, and for the past century the play has often been considered more comedy of ideas and even called tragicomedy or a "problem play," a term used for social issues plays in the late 19th century by such playwrights as Ibsen and Shaw.

### For Discussion

- What kind of comedy is *All's Well*? What role, if any, does love play? What splits the group or individuals, and what restores the group at the end, if it is restored? What kinds of comedy does the production use?



Called a clown but speaking and costumed like a professional fool, Lavatch keeps major issues at the forefront of his comedy (Elizabeth Novak's costume rendering)



# All's Well That Ends Well

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## Working with Character

### **Bertram**

#### For Discussion or Writing

- What makes Bertram tick? Discuss what effect his youth, his friend Parolles, his new-found freedom and manhood have on him. Which seems more influential on his actions in the play? Why?
- How well do you think Bertram knows Helena when the play opens? Has he noticed her? What category does he put her in?
- How would you label Bertram (not fair, but people and critics do it just the same): is he shallow? bad? juvenile? irresponsible? growing up? not ready to grow up? finding himself? a typical aristocrat? Pick a label (it does not have to be one of these), and justify your choice based on the play.
- Does Bertram change or learn anything in the course of the play? If so, what?
- What are Bertram's chances for happiness at the end of the play?



*The casting of Helena—how attractive she is—can tip an audience's sympathy. In ASF's 2010 production, Kelley Curran (above) plays Helena. Do we understand why Bertram would turn down this woman? How does this casting affect the issues in the play?*

#### Message Bertram

- Talk to Bertram about his choice of new friend, Parolles. Has Bertram always behaved as he now does, or is his attitude partly Parolles's influence?
- Write Bertram a Facebook personal note after Helena chooses him as husband. Text him about his decision whether to stay at court or run off to the war.
- Give Bertram advice about his handling of his attraction for Diana in Florence.
- While Bertram is sent out of the room in the last scene, talk to him about what's happening and how he should respond.
- Helena walks in at the end of the play. Give Bertram advice about how to respond.

#### Bertram's Worlds

- Who is Bertram and how does he behave in Rossillion? in Paris? in Florence? How might he be different when we see him back in Rossillion at the end? Does he behave differently than he does in the previous worlds?

### **Helena**

#### For Discussion or Writing

- What makes Helena tick? What influence do her social status and father have on her?
- How long do you think she has known Bertram and how well? What is her love based on?
- Is Helena hopeful, helpful, or scheming with her idea of going to Paris?
- Does Helena's attitude toward her love of Bertram change in the first scene? If so, how and why?
- How does Helena react after she chooses Bertram and hears him reject her? Has her dream become a nightmare or does she ignore his view?
- Does Helena change or learn anything in the course of the play? If so, what?
- What are Helena's chances for happiness at the end of the play?

#### Message Helena

- Talk to Helena as a friend, in person or via Facebook personal note: what advice would you give her in the first scene? What advice would you give her in Paris, considering how Bertram responds to her choosing him? What advice would you give her once she reads Bertram's letter? What are her options; what should she do?
- Having made the choice to disappear, Helena ends up in Florence and hears of Bertram. Give her advice about whether to get involved or stick to her original plan.
- Is Helena's plan for the last scene a good idea? Is this the way to get her man? Give her feedback.

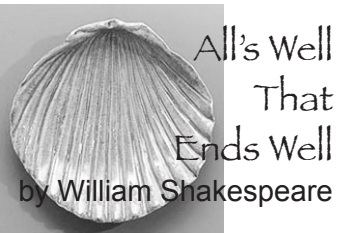
#### Helena's Worlds

- Who is Helena in Rossillion? in Paris? in Florence? Does she behave differently in these different worlds?
- How does Helena's acceptance by the Countess and the King affect her relationship with the man she loves?

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### **Parolles**

- What does Parolles want? Can we compare him to the character in *Catch Me If You Can*?
- Is Parolles hitting on Helena in the first scene?
- How would you label Parolles? What is he?
- Give Parolles advice about intervening in Bertram's relationships with Helena and Diana. Clarify his motives.
- What will become of Parolles at the end?



## Thinking about Fairy Tales

### The Fairy Tale Itself

- Fairy tales tell universal truths, but often provide unreal or supernatural elements in an otherwise familiar world. Critic Jack Zipes says the fairy tale universe is one in which anything can happen at any time and in which both fortune and misfortune can be inexplicable.
- Fairy tales often deal with class, growing up, finding oneself, or are cautionary tales.
- Vladimir Propp, the Russian scholar who studied the structure of fairy tales, describes the common elements of fairy tales as:
  - protagonist confronts a prohibition and violates it
  - departure or banishment
  - protagonist is given task related to prohibition and to character
  - characters function according to social class and profession; they may also

transform themselves or cross boundaries

- protagonist meets enemies and/or friends
- a miraculous or marvelous change
- protagonist is tested and overcomes inimical forces
- often a temporary setback
- success is usually marriage, money, survival, or wisdom

Fairy tale heroes or heroines are usually humble, simple, or naive; they believe in the miraculous, and succeed at first through humility or kindness.

- Critic Maria Tatar comments, "If the female protagonists of fairy tales are often as good as they are beautiful, their male counterparts generally appear to be as young and naive as they are stupid." She

continues that male fairy tale adolescents often fail to recognize offered help or gifts.

### Storytelling

- Rewrite the story of *All's Well That Ends Well* as a Grimm's fairy tale and/or as a Disney story. What differences arise? Why? Where on the spectrum does Shakespeare's "fairy tale" fall?
- Draw or collage a fairy tale version of *All's Well* or one of its major scenes.
- What elements of Shakespeare's story lead people to see it as a fairy tale? How does Shakespeare handle those elements? How do traditional fairy tales?
- Are fairy tales all sunny and sweet? What harmful or dangerous elements occur in fairy tales? What challenges do fairy tale protagonists face?
- What fairy tales involve impossible tasks?
- Do all fairy tales "end well"? How? Why?
- There are often different challenges for males and females in fairy tales. Compare a few fairy tales you know with female protagonists ("Little Red Riding Hood," "Snow White," "Sleeping Beauty," or "Cinderella"—and check the Grimm brothers' versions) to those with male protagonists ("Hansel and Gretel," a shared tale, "Jack and the Beanstalk," Aladdin or his German version, Dumb Hans, or "Beauty and the Beast," another shared tale). Compare Helena and Bertram to these protagonists, their challenges, and their responses.
- How does *All's Well* compare to "Beauty and the Beast" (traditional version and Disney version)?
- Many fairy tales are considered to be maturational tales describing the challenges of young people facing new responsibilities about the world, themselves, and their sexuality. In what ways is *All's Well* a maturational tale for its protagonists?



Arthur Rackham's illustration for Cinderella longing to go to the ball at court. How like Cinderella is Helena?

All's Well  
That  
Ends Well  
by William Shakespeare



The ancestral signet ring, the scallop shell, and the drum—some images to consider in *All's Well That Ends Well*

## Pursuing Images

### Bertram's ancestral ring

- What is a signet ring and what is its significance to an aristocrat in the Middle Ages? What is it used for? How does that action work as an image in the play?
- How important is the signet ring to Bertram and why? What do we learn about him by the way he treats this inheritance? What does the ring suggest; what ideas does it relate to in the play?

### Helena's pilgrimage to St. Jacques le Grand

- Research the pilgrimage to the shrine of St. James the Greater in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. What qualities or images are associated with this pilgrimage?
- Why does Helena want to go on this pilgrimage? Do you think she actually goes or intends to go?
- How many aspects of this particular pilgrimage are specific to Helena's situation in the play? (See study materials or use online research). Is she at least a figurative pilgrim?

### Parolles and the drum

- What is a military drum used for?
- Of all military equipment, why is it a drum that is specifically related to Parolles?

### The stars

- As in *Romeo and Juliet*, in *All's Well* the stars are invoked as an image for Helena's situation. Do the stars work the same way in both plays? Do stars suggest fate or destiny here? Are they courtly love imagery, with the beloved portrayed as above the lover (both better and unreachable) in qualities, inspiring great deeds on the part of the lover? Is destiny a force in *All's Well* or is it chance—or are the events “man-made/woman-made”?

### Lavatch's marriage

- Lavatch tells the Countess he wants to marry for his body and to have children. He also says his friends will help him with his marital duties. Consider how his satirical discussion of marriage compares to Bertram and Helena's experience of marriage in the play. What is marriage about in Rossillion or court society? How does Lavatch feel about marriage when he returns from court?

## Working with Double Plots

Shakespeare uses double plot structure to consider his major ideas from several different angles, usually by means of characters in parallel plot lines who experience analogous situations. So just because the action moves to a different setting or set of characters does not mean something unimportant is occurring; in Shakespeare, it more nearly means that we are looking at the main plot idea from another angle.

Thus it is crucial to consider how the more comic characters and plot elements especially Parolles and Lavatch, pertain to the central issues with Helena and Bertram.

### Things to Watch and Consider

- What Parolles wants to be, how he tries to get there, how others respond, how he is captured, how he is “unmasked”—compared to Bertram's experience
- What Parolles social status is, what he wants it to be, and how he behaves with those he wants to be his “equals”—compared to Helena's behavior with lords
- Lavatch's discussion of the reasons for marriage, for behavior at court, for following the devil or the straight and narrow

## Comparing the Sources

Shakespeare takes the basis of his plot from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a medieval collection of tales ostensibly told by a group of ten young people at a country estate fleeing the plague in Florence. Each day for ten days they choose a theme and each tell a story. For *All's Well* Shakespeare uses the ninth tale on the third day, when the theme is what is lost and regained by effort. An English version appears in William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* as the 38th novel.

Compare this story to Shakespeare's. What does Shakespeare keep; what does he change; why? How is the balance and effect of his tale different from Boccaccio's version?

## Journeys: Map It Out

- Study a map or Mapquest to find out how far it is from Rossillion to Compostela, Spain, and how far from Rossillion to Florence. What was the average day's journey in the Middle Ages? How far could Helena have traveled in two months (the time mentioned in the text)?

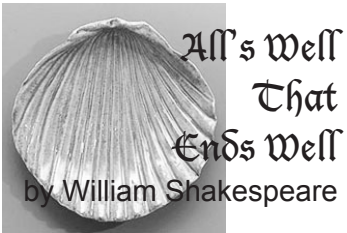


Photo: Haynes

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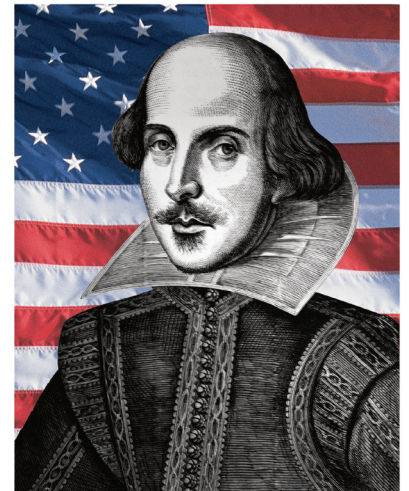
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