



ORLANDO SHAKESPEARE THEATER
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH UCF

Study Guide

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

By William Shakespeare

The Story of the Play

Bertram, the count of Rossillion, is leaving his mother, the **Countess** of Rossillion, to go with his companion, the evil-minded **Parolles**, to the court of France. He is under the guardianship of the **King of France**, who has for some time been seriously ill. Also saying goodbye to Bertram is **Helena**, the daughter of the late physician to the Rossillion family. She has been raised under the protection of the countess and is like a sister to Bertram, but she is also romantically in love with him. However, she realizes her chances of his love are slim because she was born into a lower class than he.

After Bertram leaves, Helena finally confesses her love to the countess, who encourages her. Thus Helena follows Bertram to the French court, with plans to cure the king and win Bertram's hand.

When Helena arrives at the French court, the king does not fully trust her skill, despite his knowledge of her father's reputation. Thus, she makes a bargain with him: she will pledge her life that she can help him and, if she is successful, she asks only that she be allowed to choose her own husband from the ranks of the eligible nobles of the court. Helena's cure, taken from her father's old books, is successful, and, when she is given her choice she, of course, chooses Bertram. Other lords would have been glad to accept her beautiful hand, but not Bertram. He objects to the low social status of Helena and to the interruption of his young life. Nevertheless, the king, as Bertram's guardian and sovereign, insists that he accept Helena, so the marriage is performed.

But Bertram is not yet beaten. He runs away to the wars in Tuscany and sends Helena a letter telling her that until she can obtain his ancestral ring from his finger and have a child begotten by him, then and then only will he accept her as his wife—certainly an impossible task.

Helena, who has returned to Rossillion, then sets off disguised as a pilgrim. She arrives in Florence where she hears stories of the valor of Bertram and also of the licentious way in which Parolles is leading his master into evil ways. A **Widow**, who invites Helena to lodge at her house, tells how Bertram has been soliciting her own daughter, **Diana**, to be his mistress. Helena at this point has a plan and suggests that things be so arranged that Diana pretend to agree to Bertram's request, but Helena will take Diana's place in the bed in order to fulfill her husband's conditions and to save his virtue by tricking him into avoiding an illicit romance. The widow agrees, and Helena also has Diana obtain Bertram's ring before she agrees to the appointment. She tells the girl to promise Bertram that the ring will be replaced by another when they are in bed together. Everything goes according to plan.

Afterwards Bertram, unaware of the trick, returns to the camp. There he finds that his braggart-soldier friend, Parolles' is to have his courage tested. Of course, the windbag turns out to be an utter coward. Helena, Diana, and the widow all return to France, where they go to the court and spread the rumor that Helena has died on her pilgrimage. Bertram soon hears the false news and believes he can now safely return to France, which he does. After he arrives, he proposes marriage to another woman, who asks that he give a ring as a betrothal token. He gives the ring that "Diana" had given him in bed, and the king immediately recognizes it as one that he himself had given to Helena. The king asks how Bertram obtained it, and, when the young man lies frantically, he accuses Bertram of having killed Helena.

At that moment, a letter from Diana is brought in. She calls for justice since Bertram has not kept his promise to marry her. She then enters and tells her story, supported by her mother. Bertram tries to wiggle out of his difficulty and is saved only by the appearance of Helena (whose virtue he is now beginning to appreciate). Helena announces the fulfillment of all Bertram's conditions, and he now willingly accepts his wife. Diana is offered a large dowry and the promise of a suitable husband, the king and the Countess are pleased with the outcome and *All's Well that Ends Well*.

Scholars generally agree that *All's Well That Ends Well* was written between 1600 and 1605, although some believe that the play is the lost Shakespearean drama titled *Love's Labour Won*, which was written before 1598. Most critics believe that Shakespeare's primary influence in constructing the main plot of the play was William Painter's English translation of Giovanni Boccaccio's story of Giletta of Narbonne in his *Decameron* (1353), titled *The Palace of Pleasures* (1575). Shakespeare added the characters of Parolles (and the subplot in which Parolles is the main character), the Countess of Rousillon, Lavache, Lafeu, and the second ring at the end of the play. Some commentators have remarked that the uneven nature of the play suggests that it was written at two different times in Shakespeare's life.

All's Well That Ends Well has often been called one of Shakespeare's "problem plays" or "problem comedies," a category of his work that usually includes [Measure for Measure](#) and [Troilus and Cressida](#), because these works often seem more similar in tone and theme to the tragedies Shakespeare was writing during the same time period than they do to the romantic comedies he wrote in the 1590s. Most critics acknowledge the folktale elements in the play. Some critics condemn the play outright, considering it a comedic failure. Others take into account how the play would have been received by Elizabethan audiences and find it successful, despite what might seem to be its oddities to twentieth-century readers. Rarely does a critic praise the play without reservation.

Early critics of the play focused on the incongruous plot elements and the thematic concerns of merit and rank, virtue and honor, and male versus female. More recent critics address these issues, but they focus more attention now on topics such as gender and desire. Helena's sexuality and the reversal of gender roles has generated much discussion, especially as they intertwine with other main conflicts in the play, such as social class, the bed-trick, and marriage. The ending of the play (whether the play does end well, as the title suggests it does) has historically been much-debated and continues to be so in recent criticism.

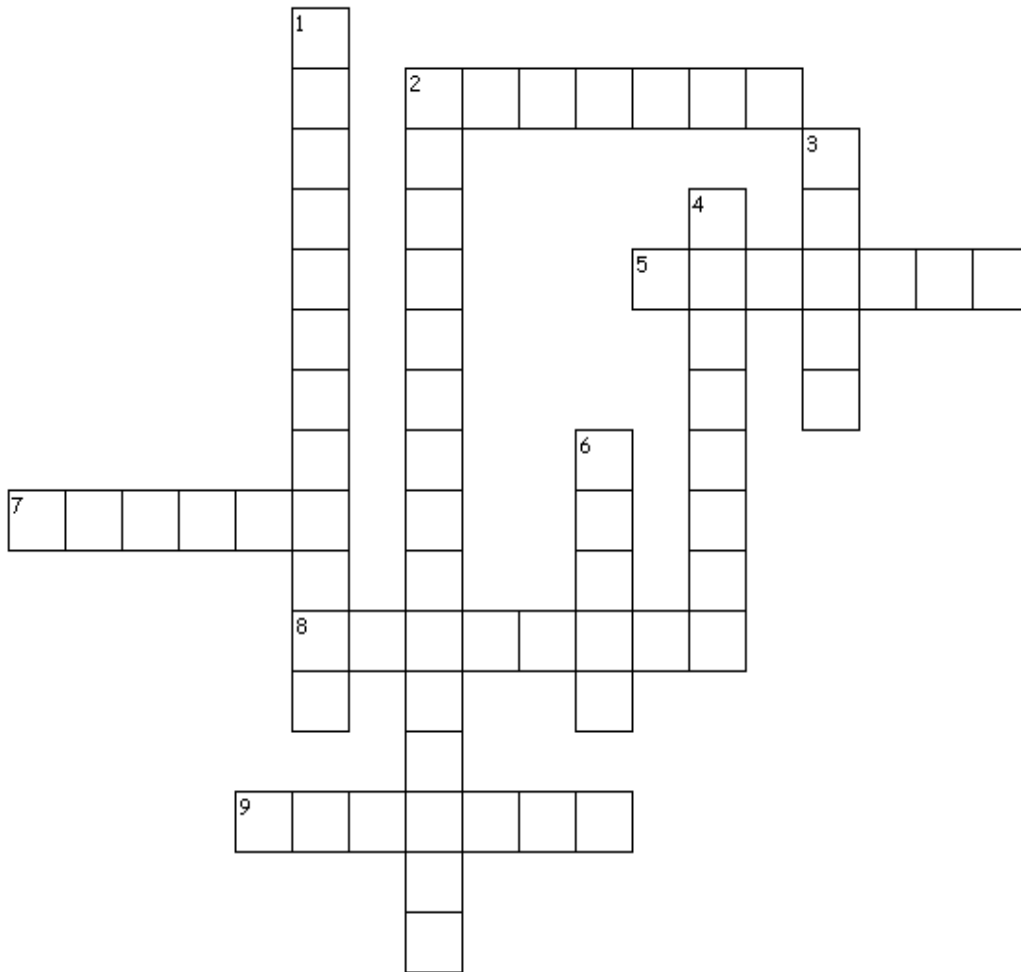
The three main characters—Helena, Bertram, and Parolles—have generated a great deal of literary criticism and comment as well. Some critics brand Helena as conniving and obsessive in her love for Bertram, while others find her wholly virtuous and noble. In general, critics are united in their displeasure with the character of Bertram, though some judge him more harshly than others. Some critics find Bertram thoroughly unrepentant and unredeemable at the end of the play, making the ending implausible. Others are more sympathetic toward him, finding him merely immature at the beginning of the play and in need of life experience in order for him to "grow up." Parolles has generated less controversy in terms of the nature of his character (even Parolles himself recognizes his deficiencies and is not ashamed of them), and some critics find the subplot involving Parolles the only thing that saves the play from utter failure.

"All's Well" Word Search

F	G	N	I	K	A	W	S	C	S	E	B	K	Y	W
Z	L	M	J	N	P	E	V	N	Z	E	E	Y	B	G
Y	X	O	E	A	L	W	R	X	S	C	R	O	K	A
I	Y	L	R	L	Q	Y	C	O	U	N	T	E	S	S
P	E	I	O	E	N	K	S	O	D	A	R	W	H	D
H	S	R	C	A	N	Z	I	N	G	R	A	P	T	I
L	A	X	L	C	E	C	W	O	P	F	M	G	P	A
P	B	D	A	F	R	O	E	I	L	A	F	E	W	N
A	O	H	C	T	A	V	A	L	D	S	S	F	R	A
G	N	T	Q	C	C	Y	C	I	D	O	Y	C	B	O
Z	K	A	O	N	I	X	K	S	T	H	W	H	U	N
I	E	G	I	T	E	L	J	S	F	P	U	L	N	F
O	Q	X	Q	R	Y	B	L	O	W	X	K	P	Y	L
U	U	V	S	N	A	L	P	R	P	P	D	S	R	E
E	U	G	E	B	K	M	Q	O	S	I	R	K	L	S

BERTRAM
FLORENCE
KING
MARIANA
ROSSILION

COUNTESS
FRANCE
LAFEW
PARIS
RYNALDO



Across

- 2. now a ward of the King
- 5. a gloomy foul-mouthed fellow
- 7. loves above her station.
- 8. has just lost a husband
- 9. neighbor of the widow

Down

- 1. Sick at the start
- 2. ambushers and interrogators
- 3. daughter to the widow
- 4. "a most notable coward."
- 6. according to Parolles "an old, filthy, scurvy lord."

For Discussion or essay.

1. Discuss the role of “status” and “social class” in the play. Do such notions still play a role in relationships today?
2. *All's Well...* presents a view of two very different generations: what differences have you noted between the older and younger generations in this play? What do you feel are the biggest differences between your generation and your parents' generation?
3. Build a case for Bertram being justified in not wanting to have a relationship with Helena.
4. Which characters have changed by the end of the play? How?
5. Lavatch is considered a Shakespearean “clown”. What is his function in the play? How is he like or unlike any other Shakespearean clown you have seen or read?
6. Does “All end well” in this play? For whom may it not?
7. This play is considered to have many “Fairy Tale” qualities: what themes or actions common to Fairy Tales can you identify in this play?

Review Questions

The Countess of Rousillon is Helena's

- (A) Sister
- (B) Mother
- (C) Guardian
- (D) Ruler

Helena's father was a celebrated

- (A) General
- (B) Doctor
- (C) Painter
- (D) Lawyer

When the play begins, Bertram is about to leave for

- (A) Florence
- (B) The King's court
- (C) A monastery
- (D) Austria

Bertram is accompanied on his journey by

- (A) The Clown
- (B) Lafew
- (C) Helena
- (D) Parolles

The Countess' Steward overhears Helena saying that

- (A) She wishes to become a doctor
- (B) She loves Bertram
- (C) She wishes to go to Paris
- (D) She wishes to become a soldier

Helena decides to go to Paris in order to

- (A) Cure the King's illness
- (B) Enter a monastery
- (C) Convince Bertram to propose to her
- (D) Attend her father's funeral

In return for her service, the King of France promises Helena

- (A) That she will be made a doctor
- (B) That she can have any husband she wishes
- (C) That Bertram be allowed to go to war

(D) That she be made a Countess

Upon marrying Helena, Bertram

- (A) Departs without even kissing her goodbye
- (B) Promises to remain by her side forever
- (C) Takes her back to Rousillon with him
- (D) Consummates the marriage quickly, and then departs

After his marriage, Bertram joins

- (A) The clergy
- (B) The King of France's army
- (C) The medical profession
- (D) The Duke of Florence's army

In order to have Bertram as a true husband, Helena must

- (A) Wear his ring and bear his child
- (B) Save the Countess' life
- (C) Save Bertram's life in battle
- (D) Sleep with Parolles

Immediately after her marriage, Helena goes to

- (A) Marseilles
- (B) Florence
- (C) Nowhere, she stays in Paris
- (D) Rousillon

In Florence, Bertram attempts to seduce

- (A) The Widow
- (B) Diana
- (C) Mariana
- (D) His wife

11.

Parolles promises that he will recover, from the enemy, a lost

- (A) Drum
- (B) Battle flag
- (C) Sword
- (D) Castle

Instead, he is taken prisoner by

- (A) Bandits
- (B) Men from his own army, in disguise
- (C) Enemy soldiers
- (D) Mercenaries hired by Helena

Bertram and Diana exchange

- (A) Kisses
- (B) Gold chains
- (C) Rings
- (D) Bracelets

Bertram believes he is sleeping with____, when in fact he is sleeping with ____

- (A) Helena; Diana
- (B) Diana; the Widow
- (C) Diana; Helena
- (D) Diana; Mariana

As he returns to France, Bertram believes that Helena is

- (A) In Rousillon
- (B) In a monastery
- (C) Dead
- (D) In Paris

When he is exposed as a coward and a fraud, Parolles

- (A) Accepts his disgrace philosophically
- (B) Kills himself
- (C) Challenges Bertram to a duel
- (D) Plans to kill Helena

12.

Returning to France, Helena is accompanied by ____ and ____.

- (A) The Countess; Diana
- (B) The Widow; Diana
- (C) Bertram; Parolles
- (D) Parolles; Diana

Trying to reach the King, Helena mistakenly journeys to

- (A) Marseilles
- (B) Paris
- (C) Rome
- (D) Rousillon

In fact, he has gone to

- (A) Paris
- (B) Rousillon
- (C) Florence
- (D) The Holy Land

The ring that the King sees in Bertram's hand originally belonged to

- (A) Bertram's father
- (B) Diana
- (C) Helena
- (D) Lafew

Diana is saved from prison by the emergence of

- (A) Helena
- (B) The Countess
- (C) The Widow
- (D) Parolles

The play ends with Helena and Bertram

- (A) Divorced
- (B) Dead
- (C) Reconciled
- (D) Married to other people

Some review questions courtesy of:

SparkNotes Editors. "SparkNote on All's Well That Ends Well."

Identify the speaker and meaning of each of these lines from *All's Well...*

T'were all one that I should love a bright particular star,
And think to wed it, he is so above me.

Act 1, Scene 1

The hind that would be mated by the lion must die for love.

1. 1

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, Which we ascribe to heaven.

1. 1

My friends were poor but honest.

1. 3

Oft expectation fails, and most oft there Where most it promises.

2. 1

It is like a barber's chair that fits all buttocks.

2. 2

From lowest place when virtuous things proceed,
The place is dignified by the doer's deed.

3. 3

They say miracles are past.

2. 3

All the learned and authentic fellows.

2. 3

A young man married is a man that 's marred.

2. 3

No legacy is so rich as honesty.

3. 5

The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.

4. 3

The Magic of “live” Theatre

When you view a movie you are watching a performance that was given, in bits and pieces, at least one year before you had a chance to see it. It’s almost the same for television; even the ones filmed before a live studio audience are edited and rearranged.

But when you attend a “live” theatre performance you are seeing the play *as it happens*, and you are a major part of the performance. Because of those two things, no two performances are ever exactly the same. “Live” theatre does not exist without an audience: actors have no reason to perform if there is no audience! Everything that goes into putting on a play is done with the thought in mind: how will this affect the audience?

Actors can “feel” an audience. The energy, excitement and attention that an audience is exuding directly affects the performance of the actors. Positive “vibes” can really be felt! So can the negative, distracting ones. All the rules of common courtesy actually go double in the theatre because all behavior, positive, and negative, affect both the actors and the rest of the audience. Everyone associated with a theatrical production of this kind is striving to make all elements as “real” as possible... but everyone knows they aren’t! Yet despite this knowledge we go along with the illusions because they allow us to experience the story as if it were really happening. This phenomenon is called “*The willing suspension of disbelief*”. Audience members who get the most out of a play are those who check their natural skepticism and cynicism at the door: when they walk into a theatre they silently say: “Okay, go ahead, fool me...I’ll make believe; I’ll play along”. When this happens, all the efforts of the actors, designers, technicians, and musicians can come together and affect the minds and hearts of the audience. It’s a cooperative effort. Just as a sports team wants and needs support of the crowd – and plays better when the crowd is on its side – so does the cast of a play need and want the support its crowd: You, the audience.

Our production of *All’s Well* will take on all the flavors of the classic Fairy Tale. See how many elements of this genre you can recognize as you watch the play:

- The poor, fair maiden and the Prince
- Mothers and Daughters; Fathers and Sons
- The old, ill King
- Miraculous cures
- The Woods
- Castles
- Silly villains
- Trickery
- Cinderella
- Little Red Riding Hood
- A Journey
- Suffering and learning in order to grow up.

If you are attending a Student Matinee of this play, you’ll have an opportunity to ask questions of the cast during a 15 minute Q & A immediately following the show.