



All's Well That Ends Well

The play begins with young Bertram assuming the title of Count of Rossillion upon the death of his father. Helena is the orphaned daughter of a great doctor, and for years lived in the Rossillion household under the care of Bertram's mother, the Countess. Over the years, Helena has developed a secret love for Bertram, although she dares not tell him. The Countess, however, is well aware of Helena's feelings (and indeed approves of them).

Against this backdrop, the King of France has taken deathly ill. Bertram has left to attend the King's court. Helena soon follows him to Paris, bearing a prescription of her father's that she feels might hold a cure for the ailing king. The cure earns her the gratitude of the King, who keeps a bargain between them that she can have her pick of the bachelors at his court. Helena, of course, picks Bertram, who is quite put off by the prospect. To Bertram, Helena is beneath him and unworthy of his notice. Nevertheless, the King will keep his word—Bertram is ordered to marry her. Bertram assents to the marriage under protest, then slips off to a war in Tuscany with his cowardly companion, Parolles.

Helena returns to Rossillion and the Countess, at first assuming that Bertram will be along directly. As it becomes apparent that he will not, Bertram sends word that she may not call him husband until she gets from him a ring (which he always wears) and can bear him a child—not a simple task, especially given that Bertram is in Italy with no intention of ever consummating their marriage. Helena once again takes matters into her own hands and sets out to follow him. She arrives in Florence in the guise of a pilgrim and lodges with a widow whose daughter, Diana, is ironically the newest object of Bertram's affections. With Diana's help, Helena aims to trap Bertram, and thus is born one of the more infamous ploys in Shakespeare's repertoire: the bed trick.

Helena gets Diana to accept Bertram's advances. Bertram, however, must agree to give Diana his ring before they share a bed. At the crucial moment, Helena takes Diana's place in the dark. She also exchanges a ring that the King had given her for Bertram's, accomplishing both terms of Bertram's challenge. When a rumor is spread of Helena's death, Bertram figures that he is clear of any responsibility for a wife he never wanted, and he returns to France. However, the King easily recognizes the ring he bears as Helena's; when Bertram is caught in a series of lies, the King has him arrested on suspicion of murdering Helena. Adding to Bertram's misery, Diana and her widow mother arrive demanding justice, which exposes even more lies. Helena finally appears—bearing

Bertram's ring and carrying his child—and reveals the truth to all. With that, Bertram seems to repent of his wrongdoings and avows his dear love for Helena.

Dramatis Personae

King of France

Duke of Florence

Bertram, Count of Rossillion

Lafew, an old lord

Parolles, a follower of Bertram

Steward to the Countess of Rossillion

A Clown

A Page

Countess of Rossillion, mother of Bertram

Helena, a gentlewoman under protection of the Countess

A Widow of Florence

Diana, daughter of the widow

Violenta, friend of the widow

Mariana, friend of the widow

Lords, Officers, Soldiers