All's Well That Ends Well (Spring 2026)

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All's Well That Ends Well is extraordinarily self-referential. As Marjorie Garber notes, "no other Shakespeare play dallies with its name in the insistent way that *All's Well* does" [618]. The explicit dalliance begins in Act Four—"All's well that ends well," proclaims Helena as she sets out to reunite with her prodigal husband, Bertram [IV.iv.35]—and carries on through the epilogue, when the actor portraying the French king addresses the audience: "The king's a beggar, now the play is done. / All is well ended if this suit be won, / That you express content" [V.iii.331–3]. But perhaps the most significant self-reference is more oblique. Following her sudden marriage, Helena spots the clown Lavatch, who has come with a letter from her new mother-in-law, the Countess of Rossillion:

> *Helena:* My mother greets me kindly. Is she well?
> *Lavatch:* She is not well, but yet she has her health; she's very merry, but yet she is not well. But thanks be given, she's very well and wants nothing i' th' world. But yet she is not well.
> *Helena:* If she be very well, what does she ail that she's not very well?
> *Lavatch:* Truly she's very well indeed, but for two things.
> *Helena:* What two things?
> *Lavatch:* One, that she's not in heaven, whither God send her quickly; the other, that she's in earth, from whence God send her quickly.
> [II.iv.1–13]

The implication—that the living cannot truly be well, and thus the only good ending is death—haunts the characters like a spirit from another genre. Unlike in the contemporaneous "problem" comedies, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*, no one in *All's Well* actually dies or is seriously endangered—not even the youths who flock to the Italian war.[1] Yet death nevertheless permeates the play, which begins shortly after the burial of the Countess's husband, Bertram's father. "Would I were with him!" the King exclaims:

> I, after him, do after him wish too,
> Since I nor wax nor honey can bring home,
> I quickly were dissolved from my hive,

[1] The King of France seems like an exception, but his festering illness is miraculously cured by Act Two.

To give some laborers room.

[I.ii.52–67]

As for Helena's father, a renowned physician who "was skillful enough to have lived still, if knowledge could be set up against mortality" [I.i.28–30], he died six months earlier [I.ii.71]. Even Lavatch, for all his standard-issue quips, is afflicted with grief. "A shrewd knave and an unhappy," the lord Lafew observes of the clown. "So a is," the Countess replies: "My lord that's gone made himself much sport out of him" [IV.v.62–4].

The resulting atmosphere is chill, even joyless. "Bertram's father is dead, and with him has died the spirit of the place," Mark Van Doren writes [179], and though I think he goes too far in this vein (Lavatch is "barren, unpleasant"; the Countess "oppresses [her household] with her thin, cold way of speaking" [180]), the world of *All's Well*, though nominally French and Italian, is about as far from the Arden of *As You Like It* or the Messina of *Much Ado About Nothing* as one can get within the bounds of romantic comedy. But the lack of joy, the pervasive unpleasantness, could have a simpler explanation: in the inexplicable object of his heroine's affections, Shakespeare created a man who is worse than unattractive—he is uncompelling. The obvious question, then, is why Helena loves Bertram. Let's begin with the better of the two,

Helena

Outside his history plays, Shakespeare does not often reuse character names, so it seems more than coincidence that two comedies about the randomness of love feature a Helena.[2] Like her counterpart in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Helena of *All's Well* is infatuated with a

[2] In both the *Oxford Shakespeare* and the *Norton Shakespeare*, the heroine of *All's Well That Ends Well* is called simply Helen: "[Helena] occurs only four time in the play, and only once in dialogue, so the Oxford editors argue that Shakespeare's preference was clearly for the two-syllable name" [*Norton*, 2181]. Of course, that name returns us to *Troilus and Cressida* and Helen of Troy, whose desirability instigated a war; in contrast, the "Helen" of *All's Well* drives Bertram to war to escape her desire. Whichever name Shakespeare preferred, he made a clear departure from his source, Boccaccio's *Decameron*; in the relevant story, told by Neifile on Day Three, the man is Bertrand but the woman is Gilette.

scornful man who flees her advances. Though the latter Helena has far more control over her story, this is not immediately apparent, and she makes her first entrance in tears. The Countess and Lafew assume she is still grieving:

> *Countess:* The remembrance of her father never approaches her heart but the tyranny of her sorrows takes all livelihood from her cheek. No more of this, Helena. Go to, no more, lest it be rather thought you affect a sorrow than to have—
> *Helena: [Aside]* I do affect a sorrow indeed, but I have it too.
>
> [I.i.48–54]

This Hamlet-like reply is an early indication Helena is not to be trifled with, though the man she mourns still lives: small comfort, for Bertram, now a ward of the King, is moving to court. As the child of a common doctor, however admired, Helena cannot imagine a happy ending for herself:

> I am undone; there is no living, none,
> If Bertram be away. ’Twere all one
> That I should love a bright particular star
> And think to wed it, he is so above me.
> In his bright radiance and collateral light
> Must I be comforted, not in his sphere.
> Th’ ambition in my love thus plagues itself:
> The hind that would be mated by the lion
> Must die for love. ’Twas pretty, though a plague,
> To see him every hour, to sit and draw
> His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls,
> In our heart’s table—heart too capable
> Of every line and trick of his sweet favor.
> But now he’s gone, and my idolatrous fancy
> Must sanctify his relics.
>
> [I.i.86–100]

The unbreachable space between Helena and the young count (at least the only one she acknowledges) is their difference in station; her sin is idolatry, not pride. Yet nowhere in her lovely reflection—indeed, Bertram grows only less lovely from here—does Helena consider how this “bright particular star” feels. He seems to think of her, if at all, as a servant—and not even of

his livery. “Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, and make much of her” is all he says to her the whole scene [I.i.76–8].

And then he is gone, leaving us to seek the fount of this impossible, unrequitable love. Boccaccio provides no clues:

> Now, the count [of Rossillion] had an only son, whose name was Bertrand, a fine youth, who was brought up along with other children of his own age, amongst whom was a daughter to this physician, called Gilette, who had an infinite esteem and love (more than was common at such an age) for him . . . .
>
> [*Decameron*, 112]

This scenario is not inconsistent with Shakespeare’s play, but that’s mainly because we learn nothing concrete about either character’s upbringing. The answer to *Why does Helena love Bertram?* may just be *Because she does*. And every day her love is not returned, it deepens.

Not a satisfying answer, but *All’s Well* is less concerned with why people love (or don’t) than with what love causes them to do. And Helena and Bertram do plenty—much of it unsavory. First, however, we meet the counterpoint to this theme: Bertram’s friend and follower Parolles, a man who is all talk and no action.[3] His swaggering entrance—Parolles is Shakespeare’s fullest take on the “braggart soldier” type—gives Helena a fine occasion to slough off self-pity and exercise her wit. She has long since taken the measure of him: “a notorious liar,” “a great way fool, solely a coward” [I.i.102–3]. Yet for a while they seem evenly matched. Parolles begins so audaciously one cannot help falling for him a little:

> *Parolles:* Save you, fair queen!
> *Helena:* And you, monarch!
> *Parolles:* No.
> *Helena:* And no.
> *Parolles:* Are you meditating on virginity?
>
> [I.i.108–12]

[3] As critics (e.g., Asimov [598]) never fail to point out, the name *Parolles* is derived from a French word for *words*.

What a question! And closer to the mark than Helena wants to admit. The ensuing repartee is more spirited than anything either gives elsewhere:

> *Helena:* You have some stain of soldier in you; let me ask you a question. Man is enemy to virginity; how may we barricado it against him?
> *Parolles:* Keep him out.
> *Helena:* But he assails, and our virginity, though valiant, in the defense yet is weak. Unfold to us some warlike resistance.
> *Parolles:* There is none. Man setting down before you will undermine you and blow you up.
> *Helena:* Bless our poor virginity from underminers and blowers-up! Is there no military policy how virgins might blow up men?
> *Parolles:* Virginity being blown down, man will quickly be blown up; marry, in blowing him down again, with the breach yourselves made you lose your city.
>
> [I.i.113–27]

Parolles has quite a bit more to say, and it's easy to imagine Helena growing impatient. "How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking?" she finally asks [I.i.151–2]. But Parolles cannot hear the shifting tone and yammers on, still memorably:

> Virginity, like an old courtier, wears her cap out of fashion, richly suited, but unsuitable, just like the brooch and the toothpick, which wear not now. Your date is better in your pie and your porridge than in your cheek; and your virginity, your old virginity, is like one of our French withered pears: it looks ill, it eats drily. Marry, 'tis a withered pear; it was formerly better; marry, yet 'tis a withered pear! Will you anything with it?
>
> [I.i.156–64]

This is the first question he has asked since "Are you meditating on virginity," some fifty lines earlier, and the unexpected return seems to throw Helena—though it's possible a chunk of text is missing from the script. As written, she abruptly changes topic, meditating no longer on herself but on what Bertram may encounter in Paris:

> Not my virginity yet. . . .
> There shall your master have a thousand loves,
> A mother, and a mistress, and a friend,
> A phoenix, captain, and an enemy,
> A guide, a goddess, and a sovereign,

A counselor, a traitress, and a dear;
His humble ambition, proud humility,
His jarring concord, and his discord dulcet,
His faith, his sweet disaster; with a world
Of pretty, fond, adoptious christendoms
That blinking Cupid gossips.

[I.i.165–75]

The thought of cutesy nicknames from Bertram's future admirers is too much; one can practically feel the heat from Helena's flustered cheeks as she grasps for a conclusion, yet she cannot stop—like her interlocutor, all words:

Helena: Now shall he—
I know not what he shall. God send him well!
The court's a learning place, and he is one—
Parolles: What one, i' faith?
Helena: That I wish well. 'Tis pity—
Parolles: What's pity?
Helena: That wishing well had not a body in't,
Which might be felt; that we, the poorer born,
Whose baser stars do shut us up in wishes,
Might with effects of them follow our friends,
And show what we alone must think, which never
Returns us thanks.

[I.i.175–85]

These last lines could *almost* describe Parolles, whose own wish to rise above his station never does produce a worthy deed. Alas, he is called away before he can respond, cutting short the play's only significant dialogue between them[4]—and arguably the only words Helena has with someone from whom she does not need or want something. Yet she seems to have benefitted from the banter anyway. "Get thee a good husband, and use him as he uses thee," Parolles advises as he exits [I.i.212–13], and suddenly Helena is brimming with confidence she can do just that:

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,

[4] They speak briefly in Act Two, Scene Four, though only because Parolles is delivering a message; he seems more interested in Lavatch, and Helena makes no attempt at wit.

> Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky
> Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull
> Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.
>
> [I.i.214–17]

This is quite a different view of the sky, which in her first soliloquy seemed to consist of a single unreachable star. On the contrary, she now declares,

> The mightiest space in fortune nature brings
> To join like likes, and kiss like native things.
> Impossible be strange attempts to those
> That weigh their pains in sense, and do suppose
> What hath been cannot be. Who ever strove
> To show her merit that did miss her love?
>
> [I.i.220–5]

How, after one conversation with Parolles, has Helena so completely reimagined herself: from one plagued by ambition—a "hind" self-destructively in love with a "lion"—to one whose merit is self-evident? Perhaps she needed only recall that Parolles—without any apparent aid from heaven—has already claimed a piece of Bertram's heart. If he can do it, this man of "superfluous folly" [I.i.107], surely so can she! A plan begins to form. "The king's disease," she muses before exiting: "my project may deceive me, / But my intents are fixed, and will not leave me" [I.i.226–7]. Yet when next we see her, she is still moping around Rossillion[5]—and her intents have been uncovered. "I was very late more near her than I think she wished me," reports the Countess's dutiful steward:

> alone she was, and did communicate to herself her own words to her own ears. . . . Her matter was, she loved your son. Fortune, she said, was no goddess, that had put such difference betwixt their two estates; Love no god, that would not extend his might, only where qualities were level; [Diana no] queen of virgins, that would suffer her poor knight surprised without rescue in the first assault, or ransom afterward. This she delivered in the most bitter touch of sorrow that e'er I heard virgin exclaim in,

---

[5] We may assume several days have passed—at least as long as the journey to Paris, for Bertram meets the King in the intervening scene.

> which I held my duty speedily to acquaint you withal, sithence, in the loss that may happen,[6] it concerns you something to know it.
>
> [I.iii.103–17]

Left alone to brood, Helena has lost faith in herself.

The steward's report does not surprise the Countess. "Many likelihoods informed me of this before, which hung so tottering in the balance that I could neither believe nor misdoubt," she reflects [I.iii.119–21]. Helena is summoned, and the Countess reassures the girl she is loved—at least maternally:

> 'Tis often seen
> Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds
> A native slip to us from foreign seeds.
> You ne'er oppressed me with a mother's groan,
> Yet I express to you a mother's care.
> God's mercy, maiden, does it curd thy blood
> To say I am thy mother?
>
> [I.iii.140–6]

Not yet the master actor she becomes, Helena cannot control her reactions, instinctively flinching to think of the Countess as a mother—though not, she hastens to add, because the thought itself is repellent:

> You are my mother, madam. Would you were—
> So that my lord your son were not my brother—
> Indeed my mother! or were you both our mothers,
> I care no more for than I do for heaven,
> So I were not his sister. Can't no other,
> But I your daughter, he must be my brother?
>
> [I.iii.157–62]

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[6] It's worth asking what "loss" he means, for by her own admission Helena has no chance at Bertram. Could the steward really fear Bertram: the unscrupulous advantage he might take, should he learn of Helena's love? Presumably this is not his first time eavesdropping—might he have a better sense of Bertram's true character than a doting mother?

The Countess is wonderfully direct throughout, and here she does not disappoint. “Yes, Helen,” she answers, “you might be my daughter-in-law” [I.iii.163]; a few lines later, she dispenses with the hypothetical:

> Now I see
> The myst’ry of your loneliness, and find
> Your salt tears’ head. Now to all sense ’tis gross:
> You love my son.
>
> [I.iii.166–9]

Helena blushes; first she says nothing, then she begs pardon, then she obfuscates (“Do not you love him, madam?” [I.iii.183]), but the Countess will not be put off, and finally Helena submits:

> Then I confess
> Here on my knee before high heaven and you,
> That before you, and next unto high heaven,
> I love your son.
> My friends were poor but honest; so’s my love.
> Be not offended, for it hurts not him
> That he is loved of me. I follow him not
> By any token of presumptuous suit,
> Nor would I have him till I do deserve him;
> Yet never know how that desert should be.
>
> [I.iii.187–96]

Yet even as she emphasizes her unworthiness, Helena cannily leaves open a door: she will not have her desire . . . *until* she deserves it. Furthermore, as we recently heard, she has a “project” for this. The Countess seems to have heard, too. Helena concludes her speech by appealing to the older woman’s empathy: if ever in your “virtuous youth” you loved as I do,

> O, then give pity
> To her whose state is such that cannot choose
> But lend and give where she is sure to lose;
> That seeks not to find that her search implies,
> But, riddlelike, lives sweetly where she dies.
>
> [I.iii.205–13]

But the Countess is not interested in riddles, and again her directness is bracing: “Had you not lately an intent—speak truly— / To go to Paris?” she asks [I.iii.214–15]. Helena admits as much, but again is careful with her language: we hear no ulterior motive, no hint that Bertram is her true destination:

> *Helena:* You know my father left me some prescriptions
> Of rare and proved effects, such as his reading
> And manifest experience had collected
> For general sovereignty; and that he willed me
> In heedful'st reservation to bestow them,
> As notes whose faculties inclusive were
> More than they were in note. Amongst the rest
> There is a remedy, approved, set down,
> To cure the desperate languishings whereof
> The king is rendered lost.
> *Countess:* This was your motive
> For Paris, was it? Speak.
> *Helena:* My lord your son made me to think of this;
> Else Paris, and the medicine, and the king
> Had from the conversation of my thoughts
> Happily been absent then.
>
> [I.iii.217–31]

This is untrue—we just watched Parolles, not Bertram, trigger the idea in Helena. But the Countess does not press further, and the women take up a new question: whether the King will accept help from “[a] poor unlearned virgin, when the schools, / Emboweled of their doctrine, have left off / The danger to itself” [I.iii.236–8]. Though she may be star-crossed in love, Helena senses their beneficence now:

> *Helena:* There's something in't
> More than my father's skill, which was the great'st
> Of his profession, that his good receipt
> Shall for my legacy be sanctified
> By th' luckiest stars in heaven; and would your honor
> But give me leave to try success, I'd venture
> The well-lost life of mine on his grace's cure
> By such a day and hour.
> *Countess:* Dost thou believe't?

Helena: Ay, madam, knowingly.

[I.iii.238–46]

With that, the Countess promises “my leave and love,” as well as “[m]eans and attendants, and my loving greetings / To those of mine in court,” and she orders Helena to set out in the morning [I.iii.247–52].

To this point, Helena has wavered between confidence and doubt, expectation and resignation, but she leaves Rossillion committed to the philosophy that shall serve her so well: be ready for good Fortune, whatever the odds, so you can take full advantage. In the remaining four acts, Helena seizes every opportunity to shape her fate—and patiently trusts fate to deliver what she needs. This faith in providence gives her the charisma to charm lords and kings. In Paris, Lafew—to whom Helena spoke not a word at Rossillion—marvels to find “one that in her sex, her years, profession, / Wisdom and constancy, hath amazed me more / Than I dare blame my weakness” [II.i.84–6]. When she approaches the King, however, he is polite but dismissive: “Thou thought’st to help me, and such thanks I give / As one near death to those that wish him live” [II.i.131–2].

At first, Helena downplays her abilities, in contrast to her extraordinary claims:

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.
Oft expectation fails, and most oft there
Where most it promises; and oft it hits
Where hope is coldest and despair most shifts.

[II.i.137–45]

This does not change the King’s mind: “I must not hear thee,” he replies, and bids her farewell [II.i.146]. So Helena tries a different tack: though still promising a miracle, she subtly shifts the

focus—and pronouns—to highlight her own agency. Whatever credit officially goes to God, this speech is about Helena, and it does the trick:

> *Helena:* Inspired merit so by breath is barred.
> It is not so with him that all things knows
> As 'tis with us that square our guess by shows;
> But most it is presumption in us, when
> The help of heaven we count the act of men.[7]
> Dear sir, to my endeavors give consent;
> Of heaven, not me, make an experiment.
> I am not an imposter, that proclaim
> Myself against the level of mine aim;
> But know I think, and think I know most sure,
> My art is not past power, nor you past cure.
> *King:* Art thou so confident? Within what space
> Hop'st thou my cure?
>
> [II.i.149–61]

Having defied the King's "most learned doctors" and "congregated college" [II.i.117–18], Helena now one-ups herself: the miracle will also happen impossibly quickly. In fact, she *two*-ups herself, in the same breath halving the recovery time to a single day:

> The great'st grace lending grace,
> Ere twice the horses of the sun shall bring
> Their fiery torcher his diurnal ring,
> Ere twice in murk and occidental damp
> Moist Hesperus hath quenched her sleepy lamp,
> Or four and twenty times the pilot's glass
> Hath told the thievish minutes how they pass,
> What is infirm from your sound parts shall fly,
> Health shall live free, and sickness freely die.
>
> [II.i.161–9]

What's more, she pledges, if her efforts fail, then "extended / With vilest torture let my life be ended" [II.i.170–5]—we may assume none of the royal physicians showed such confidence in

[7] We might wonder if Helena believes this, when only a few scenes earlier she was soliloquizing the opposite. ("Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, / Which we ascribe to heaven" [I.i.214–15].) Again, I think the answer is Helena believes *both*: God (or Fortune, or the stars, or what have you) makes the pathway, but only the person can walk it.

their art! His resistance gone, the King praises Helena as everyone in the play (or every honorable person) does after meeting her:

> Methinks in thee some blessed spirit doth speak
> His powerful sound within an organ weak;
> And what impossibility would slay
> In common sense, sense saves another way.
> Thy life is dear, for all that life can rate
> Worth name of life in thee hath estimate:
> Youth, beauty, wisdom, courage—all
> That happiness and prime can happy call.
> Thou this to hazard needs must intimate
> Skill infinite, or monstrous desperate.
> Sweet practicer, thy physic I will try,
> That ministers thine own death if I die.
>
> [II.i.176–87]

Her first objective achieved—and with a directness that would please the Countess—Helena segues to the other reason for her journey:

> *Helena:* But if I help, what do you promise me?
> *King:* Make thy demand.
> *Helena:* But will you make it even?
> *King:* Ay, by my scepter and my hopes of heaven.
> *Helena:* Then shalt thou give me with thy kingly hand
> What husband in thy power I will command.
> Exempted be from me the arrogance
> To choose from forth the royal blood of France,
> My low and humble name to propagate
> With any branch of image of thy state;
> But such a one, thy vassal, whom I know
> Is free for me to ask, thee to bestow.
>
> [II.i.191–201]

Apparently there *are* limits to what simple merit can win for itself—a necessary reminder, as we shall see when we take a closer look at the King. Not that it matters, for Helena has long since made her choice: that "free vassal" whose mother has blessed the match already.

As promised, the King is cured immediately, and he summons "all the lords in court" [II.iii.45] so Helena can make her choice. ("*Mort du vinaigre!*" exclaims Parolles: "Is not this

Helen?" [II.iii.43]. Bertram says nothing.) Here is the first proof of Helena's talent for theatre. Her opening speech may reflect genuine anxiety that Bertram will reject her, but she is also exaggerating for effect: the woman who just danced on with the King [II.iii.41–2] cannot be as timid as she now presents herself:

> *Helena:* I am a simple maid, and therein wealthiest
> That I protest I simply am a maid.
> Please it your majesty, I have done already.
> The blushes in my cheeks thus whisper me,
> "We blush that thou shouldst choose; but be refused,
> Let the white death sit on thy cheek forever,
> We'll ne'er come there again."
> *King:* Make choice and see;
> Who shuns thy love shuns all his love in me.
> *Helena:* Now, Dian, from thy alter do I fly,
> And to imperial Love, that god most high,
> Do my sighs stream.
>
> [II.iii.65–75]

Again, she knows exactly whom to pick—there is no need for suspense. But Helena clearly relishes the show—and her starring role—as she moves among "[t]his youthful parcel / Of noble bachelors" [II.iii.51–2], raising and promptly dashing each man's hope:

> *Helena:* Sir, will you hear my suit?
> *First Lord:* And grant it.
> *Helena:* Thanks, sir, all the rest is mute.
>
> [II.iii.75–6]

She does a version of this routine three more times before approaching Bertram—who really has been mute since her entrance. However much more she has earned, Helena knows what is expected of a wife: far from "commanding," she pledges to obey:

> *Helena:* I dare not say I take you, but I give
> Me and my service, ever whilst I live,
> Into your guiding power.—This is the man.
> *King:* Why then, young Bertram, take her; she's thy wife.
>
> [II.iii.101–4]

Needless to say, Bertram is not pleased. We shall look more closely at his part in this scene—and the King's—later. For now, let's stick with Helena; in her initial response to this setback, we glimpse what might have been a very different play:

> *Bertram:* I cannot love her, nor will strive to do't.
> *King:* Thou wrong'st thyself if thou shouldst strive to choose.
> *Helena:* That you are well restored, my lord, I'm glad.
> Let the rest go.
>
> [II.iii.144–7]

Does Helena mean this? Harold Bloom thinks not: "'Let the rest go' is wonderful, in its admixture of despair and cunning, since Helena knows, as does the King, that the royal honor and power alike are at stake" [352]. But Harold Goddard hears in the same line sincere renunciation: "those four words are her moral peak" [42]. What's more, Goddard argues compellingly,

> It is difficult for the imagination not to ask what would have happened if Helena had had the courage to remain at this level and had absolutely refused, even against the King's wishes, to allow an unwilling bridegroom to go through the empty form of marriage with her. There is no question that we would have admired her more, or that, however secretly, Bertram would have also. Might he not have gone away from such a rejection to dream of the spirited girl who had had the self-respect both to love and to refuse him?

We can never know—and Bloom may be correct regardless that the King would have forbidden such a turn. What is certain is that Helena says nothing more as Bertram, bullied into submission, takes her hand and agrees to the match, then follows her offstage to be married ASAP. (Likely fearing the groom will try again to back out, the King deems the ceremony "expedient on the now-born brief" [II.iii.177–9].)

Helena's next entrance puts her in a more-familiar sphere, conversing first with Lavatch (who has brought greetings from the Countess) and then with Parolles, though she says little to either. As when she chose Bertram, her dominant mode here is submission:

Parolles: Madam, my lord will go away tonight;
A very serious business calls on him.
The great prerogative and rite of love,
Which, as your due, time claims, he does acknowledge;
But puts it off to a compelled restraint;
. . .
Helena: What's his will else?
Parolles: That you will take your instant leave o' th' king,
And make this haste as your own good proceeding,
Strengthened with what apology you think
May make it probable need.
Helena: What more commands he?
Parolles: That, having this obtained, you presently
Attend his further pleasure.
Helena: In everything I wait upon his will.

[II.iv.39–54]

Helena does manage to see Bertram before each leaves court—she for Rossillion; he, in secret, for the Italian wars. For me the scene is the most poignant in the play, as Bertram all but explicitly tells Helena he loathes her ("Here comes my clog," he announces as she enters [II.v.52]), and Helena refuses to hear:

Bertram: 'Twill be two days ere I shall see you; so
I leave you to your wisdom.
Helena: Sir, I can nothing say
But that I am your most obedient servant.
Bertram: Come, come; no more of that.
Helena: And ever shall
With true observance seek to eke out that
Wherein toward me my homely stars have failed
To equal my great fortune.
Bertram: Let that go;
My haste is very great. Farewell. Hie home.

[II.v.69–76]

Deprived of her wedding night, Helena hopes for a goodbye kiss, though she can scarcely utter the word. Bertram won't even stoop to a peck on the cheek:

Helena: Pray, sir, your pardon.
Bertram: Well, what would you say?

Helena: I am not worthy of the wealth I owe,
Nor dare I say 'tis mine; and yet it is—
But, like a timorous thief, most fain would steal
What law does vouch mine own.
Bertram: What would you have?
Helena: Something, and scarce so much; nothing, indeed.
I would not tell you what I would, my lord.
Faith, yes—
Strangers and foes do sunder, and not kiss.
Bertram: I pray you stay not, but in haste to horse.
Helena: I shall not break your bidding, good my lord.
Bertram: Where are my other men, monsieur? Farewell.
Go thou toward home—

[II.v.77–89]

With that, she curtsies and leaves. Alone with Parolles, Bertram finishes the thought—"where I will never come / Whilst I can shake my sword or hear the drum." [II.v.89–90]—but the aspiring soldier is too craven to tell Helena until he is safely away. Indeed, it's unclear when he planned to tell her at all. In the next scene, we learn he sent Lavatch back to Rossillion with a letter for the Countess, which the stunned old woman reads aloud:

> "I have sent you a daughter-in-law. She hath recovered the king and undone me. I have wedded her, not bedded her, and sworn to make the 'not' eternal. You shall hear I am run away; know it before the report come. If there be breadth enough in the world, I will hold a long distance."[8]

[III.ii.19–24]

This is bad enough … but did Bertram also expect his mother to break the news to his bride. The Countess is spared the thankless task only because, by sheer coincidence, on his way to Italy Bertram meets the brothers Dumaine[9], who are themselves returning to France, and gives them a "Dear Jane" letter for Helena, who—by further coincidence—meets the two lords on her way

[8] Bertram concludes the letter, "My duty to you."—demonstrating, I suppose, he is not totally humorless.
[9] identified in most scenes simply as *First Lord* and *Second Lord*

home from court [III.ii.51–4]. Helena's letter is distinguished by the addition of a "dreadful sentence," which she reads aloud:

> "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.'"
>
> [III.ii.56–60]

The Countess attempts to comfort Helena—and swiftly disowns Bertram: "He was my son," she declares, "But I do wash his name out of my blood, / And thou art all my child" [III.ii.65–7]. But Helena, fixating on another "bitter" sentence from her letter, scarcely hears: "Till I have no wife, I have nothing in France," she reads [III.ii.73–4], then says nothing else but "Ay, madam" [III.ii.74] until she is alone. The ensuing soliloquy is her third[10]; as best I can tell, of Shakespeare's women, only Juliet speaks more. Yet Helena shall not speak another; in the play's second half, she sustains her pursuit of Bertram by ceasing to reflect on it. At the cost of her interiority, she becomes master of the plot—and considerably less interesting. She "thins out," as Van Doren argues: "From the time she disguises herself as a pilgrim and meets Diana's mother in the streets of Florence she is no more a person than Bertram is" [183].

In her final soliloquy, however, Helena seems ready to quit. Far from blaming Bertram for his callousness or duplicity, she castigates herself for having dared pursue him:

> Nothing in France until he has no wife!
> Thou shalt have none, Rossillion, none in France;
> Then hast thou all again. Poor lord, is't I
> That chase thee from thy country, and expose
> Those tender limbs of thine to the event
> Of the none-sparing war? And is it I
> That drive thee from the sportive court, where thou
> Wast shot at with fair eyes, to be the mark
> Of smoky muskets?
>
> [III.ii.98–106]

[10] She speaks two in the opening scene: I.i.81–100 and 214–27.

Helena does not know Bertram wanted to run off to war almost from the moment he arrived at court: "I am commanded here and kept a coil with 'Too young,' and 'The next year,' and ''Tis too early,' he complains before she has even shown up [II.i.27–8]. She recognizes the danger more than any of the play's men—perhaps because, as a woman, she is not compelled to seek and win honor:

O you leaden messengers
That ride upon the violent speed of fire,
Fly with false aim; move the still-piecing air,
That sings with piercing; do not touch my lord!
Whoever shoots at him, I set him there.
Whoever charges on his forward breast,
I am the caitiff that do hold him to't.
And though I kill him not, I am the cause
His death was so effected.

[III.ii.106–14]

This to prevent, she makes a decision:

No; come thou home, Rossillion,
Whence honor but of danger wins a scar,
As oft it loses all. I will be gone.
My being here it is that holds thee hence.
Shall I stay here to do't? No, no, although
The air of paradise did fan the house
And angels officed all. I will be gone,
That pitiful rumor may report my flight
To consolate thine ear. Come, night; end, day;
For with the dark, poor thief, I'll steal away.

[III.ii.118–27]

But what exactly does she decide, and when? She leaves the Countess a letter that begins:

I am Saint Jaques' pilgrim, thither gone.
Ambitious love hath so in me offended
That barefoot plod I the cold ground upon,
With sainted vow my faults to have amended.[11]

[III.iv.4–7]

[11] The complete letter is a perfect sonnet: even at her humblest, Helena can't help performing.

As Isaac Asimov notes, "Jaques" is the French name for Saint James the Apostle, who according to tradition is buried far to the west, in Spain: "If Helena goes there she is traveling in the direction opposite to that Bertram has taken" [603]. Yet three scenes after "stealing away," Helena turns up in Florence, just in time to see Bertram march across the stage with the rest of the Florentine army. Was her letter therefore a lie, calculated to engender maximum sympathy as she secretly plots to win back her husband? Not necessarily: in Shakespeare's world, a shrine to Saint Jaques is located near Florence, and—in another convenient coincidence—the first person Helena meets outside the city works in the pilgrimage business:

> *Widow:* Look, here comes a pilgrim. I know she will lie at my house; thither they send one another. I'll question her. God save you, pilgrim! Whither are you bound?
> *Helena:* To Saint Jaques le Grand.
> Where do the palmers lodge, I do beseech you?
> *Widow:* At the Saint Francis here, beside the port.
> *Helena:* Is this the way?
> *Widow:* Ay, marry, is't.
>
> [III.v.29–37]

Helena knows Bertram is in Florence: this was confirmed in her presence, before she left Rossillion [III.ii.67–8]. So, I'm inclined to think Saint Jaques is another example of Helena's trust in both providence and herself: by placing herself where she and Bertram can cross paths, Helena creates an opportunity to fulfill the seemingly impossible conditions he set for her; if nothing comes of that, she can still be a pilgrim. But providence starts working for Helena immediately! Unprompted, the widow and her daughter, Diana, recap the story to this point:

> *Widow:* You came, I think, from France?
> *Helena:* I did so.
> *Widow:* Here you shall see a countryman of yours
> That has done worthy service.
> *Helena:* His name, I pray you?
> *Diana:* The Count Rossillion. Know you such a one?
> *Helena:* But by the ear, that hears most nobly of him;

His face I know not.
Diana: Whatsome'er he is,
He's bravely taken here. He stole from France,
As 'tis reported, for the king had married him
Against his liking. Think you it is so?
Helena: Ay, surely, mere the truth; I know his lady.
Diana: There is a gentleman that serves the count
Reports but coarsely of her.
Helena: What's his name?
Diana: Monsieur Parolles.
Helena: O, I believe with him,
In argument of praise or to the worth
Of the great count himself, she is too mean
To have her name repeated. All her deserving
Is a reserved honesty, and that
I have not heard examined.

[III.v.45–62]

These unflattering lines could be a bid for pity, or a test of the women's character—is their instinct to side with Bertram or his sad wife?—but they are just as likely sincere: we have heard Helena in a similar mode before, particularly in soliloquy. Either way, Diana gives the correct response, and her mother—still unprompted—turns the conversation in an intriguing direction:

Diana: Alas, poor lady!
'Tis a hard bondage to become the wife
Of a detesting lord.
Widow: I write, good creature, whereso'er she is,
Her heart weighs sadly. This young maid might do her
A shrewd turn, if she pleased.
Helena: How do you mean?
May be the amorous count solicits her
In the unlawful purpose.
Widow: He does indeed,
And brokes with all that can in such a suit
Corrupt the tender honor of a maid;
But she is armed for him, and keeps her guard
In honestest defense.

[III.v.62–73]

If we credit her prior words, Helena left home because she decided her husband is better off without her. Upon learning their husband is urgently trying to be unfaithful, some women might decide *they* are better off without *him*. But Helena sees only the convoluted path back to Rossillion. She ends the scene by inviting Diana and her mother to supper; by her next entrance, she has revealed her true identity and asked for their help in tricking Bertram: Diana shall arrange to meet him for sex, in exchange for his prized ring ("which never shall come off"), but Helena shall take Diana's place in bed, trusting that 1) her oblivious husband will not know the difference, and 2) one night shall suffice to impregnate her ("show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to").

The widow is initially skeptical:

> *Helena:* If you misdoubt me that I am not she,
> I know not how I shall assure you further
> But I shall lose the grounds I work upon.
> *Widow:* Though my estate be fallen, I was well born,
> Nothing acquainted with these businesses,
> And would not put my reputation now
> In any staining act.
>
> [III.vii.1–7]

Helena's answer is pragmatic: in recompense, she will restore the widow's "fallen" estate.

> Take this purse of gold,
> And let me buy your friendly help thus far,
> Which I will overpay, and pay again
> When I have found it.
>
> [III.vii.14–17]

Yet part of Helena also seems skeptical, and she works hard to assuage it. If "star" is her favorite word in the play's first half, in this scene it is "lawful." "Now I see / The bottom of your purpose," says the widow; "You see it lawful then," replies Helena [III.vii.28–30]. Both women then hammer home the point:

> *Widow:* I have yielded.

> Instruct my daughter how she shall persever,
> That time and place with this deceit so lawful
> May prove coherent. . . .
> *Helena:* Why then tonight
> Let us assay our plot, which if it speed,
> Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed,
> And lawful meaning in a lawful act,
> Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact.[12]
> But let's about it.
>
> [III.vii.36–48]

The plot works exactly as intended: Diana obtains Bertram's ring, and Helena gives him a different ring—and her virginity. (Unknown is whether *he* is still a virgin.) Because all this happens offstage—and, not incidentally, to a man we dislike—it's easy to overlook just how outrageous a scheme this is. But it's worth stating plainly: Helena tricks Bertram into having sex with, and impregnating, her. Yes, they are married, and yes, to the Elizabethans the whole point of marriage was procreation, but Bertram married against his will, and he does not hide his revulsion. Were the roles reversed, I do not think we would hesitate to call what happens rape. But the play cannot work (if it works at all) if we think Helena is a rapist. (Certainly that is not the play's perspective.) It might, however, explain why she keeps reminding everyone of the rightness of her actions—and the happy ending she anticipates. I suspect we don't think too deeply about Helena's "bed trick" because we want that happy ending for her—and because we dislike Bertram and don't much care what happens to him. It's not like there is lasting damage: ultimately, he is reconciled with his king and family, restored to his inheritance, and possessed of the honor and renown he won in Italy; it's no stretch to imagine him riding off to future campaigns—and attempted affairs—as Helena raises the kids and runs the household. Whether any of this counts as *happy*, or ending *well*, is a different question.

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[12] After arranging the assignation, Diana takes up the theme: "Only, in this disguise I think't no sin / To cozen him that would unjustly win," she concludes her own soliloquy [IV.ii.75–6].

Quite a bit more happens before we get there, however, and Helena's plan has another layer. We first learn this from the brothers Dumaine, right around the time Bertram is unknowingly consummating his marriage:

> *Second Lord:* Sir, his wife some two months since fled from his house.[13] Her pretense is a pilgrimage to Saint Jaques le Grand; which holy undertaking with most austere sanctimony she accomplished; and there residing, the tenderness of her nature became as a prey to her grief; in fine, made a groan of her last breath, and now she sings in heaven.
> *First Lord:* How is this justified?
> *Second Lord:* The stronger part of it by her own letters, which makes her story true, even to the point of her death. Her death itself, which could not be her office to say is come, was faithfully confirmed by the rector of the place.
> *First Lord:* Hath the count all this intelligence?
> *Second Lord:* Ay, and the particular confirmations, point from point, to the full arming of the verity.
>
> [IV.iii.47–62]

We can only assume Helena distributed another purse of gold to the rector of Saint Jaques! It's less clear why she thinks it necessary to feign death—except insofar as it makes her unexpected reappearance at court, in the play's final scene, more dramatic.

To that end, she sets out the next day. Yet even now, on the verge of triumph, she seems anxious, aware that others might disapprove of her actions—or even condemn them. "That you may well perceive I have not wronged you," she tells the widow and Diana, who accompany her,

> One of the greatest in the Christian world
> Shall be my surety; 'fore whose throne 'tis needful,
> Ere I can perfect mine intents, to kneel.
> Time was I did him a desired office,
> Dear almost as his life; which gratitude
> Through flinty Tartar's bosom would peep forth
> And answer thanks.
>
> [IV.iv.1–8]

[13] If this is true, Helena must have spent nearly all that time on the road; this conversation seems to be happening on the same day she arrived in Florence.

And the king is not the only person who owes Helena gratitude, as she reminds her companions:

> *Widow:* Gentle madam,
> You never had a servant to whose trust
> Your business was more welcome.
> *Helena:* Nor you, mistress,
> Ever a friend whose thoughts more truly labor
> To recompense your love. Doubt not but heaven
> Hath brought me up to be your daughter's dower,
> As it hath fated her to be my motive
> And helper to a husband.
>
> [IV.iv.14–21]

That last word makes her think of someone who has *not* been a friend. Abruptly—and for the first time since leaving Rossillion—Helena hesitates; she nearly sounds bitter:

> But, O strange men!
> That can such sweet use make of what they hate,
> When saucy trusting of the cozened thoughts
> Defiles the pitchy night; so lust doth play
> With what it loathes, for that which is away.
> But more of this hereafter.
>
> [IV.iv.21–6]

But Helena never returns to "this," whatever it might be. Probably she sees the danger in pondering the contradictions of lust, male or female, lest she be forced to acknowledge any ambivalence of her own: after all, if she is not fully committed to Bertram, why on earth has she been chasing him? Instead, she falls back on the comfort of platitudes. "We must away," she announces:

> Our wagon is prepared, and time revives us.
> All's well that ends well; still the fine's the crown.
> Whate'er the course, the end is the renown.
>
> [IV.iv.33–6]

Helena's next scene follows the same pattern. First, an anxious entrance—this time, everyone is exhausted from traveling to court—soothed by the promise of a reward:

> But this exceeding posting day and night

Must wear your spirits low. We cannot help it;
But since you have made the days and nights as one,
To wear your gentle limbs in my affairs,
Be bold you do so grow in my requital
As nothing can unroot you.

[V.i.1–6]

Then, an unexpected moment of doubt, as Helena asks a French gentleman she recognizes to deliver a message to the king:

Gentleman: The king's not here.
Helena: Not here, sir?
Gentleman: Not indeed;
He hence removed last night, and with more haste
Than is his use.
Widow: Lord, how we lose our pains!

[V.i.22–4]

Finally, the same lesson: "All's well that ends well yet, / Though time seem so adverse and means unfit," Helena reminds us [V.i.25–6].

More cynically, "All's well that ends well" is just another way to say "The ends justify the means." Even assuming this is true, does the play end well for Helena—or well enough to make her quest worthwhile? I suspect *no* is the majority opinion, but to understand why, we need to rewind to the start and trace Bertram's journey through. As we have seen, from her many struggles, Helena learns both to trust in fortune and not to wait around for it. Does the object of her obsession learn anything comparable? Anything at all?

Bertram

Considering his centrality to the plot, Bertram is pretty unremarkable. In his early interactions with the Countess, Lafew, and the King, there are hints of a young man chafing against the authority and expectations of an older generation. Indeed, generational tension is one of the play's themes; the dying King fixates on the subject, complaining—in a "kids these days" way—of "our young lords," who "may jest / Till their own scorn return to them unnoted / Ere

they can hide their levity in honor" [I.ii.33–5]. In contrast to such misapplied wit, the King idealizes Bertram's dead father:

> So like a courtier, contempt nor bitterness
> Were in his pride, or sharpness. If they were,
> His equal had awaked them, and his honor,
> Clock to itself, knew the true minute when
> Exception bid him speak, and at this time
> Hie tongue obeyed his hand. Who were below him
> He used as creatures of another place,
> And bowed his eminent top to their low ranks,
> Making them proud of his humility,
> In their poor praise he humbled. Such a man
> Might be a copy to these younger times,
> Which, followed well, would demonstrate them now
> But goers backward.
>
> [I.ii.36–48]

Bertram's reply is gracious:

> His good remembrance, sir,
> Lies richer in your thoughts than on his tomb.
> So in approof lives not his epitaph
> As in your royal speech.
>
> [I.ii.48–51]

Still, it's hard to imagine any young man with a modicum of ambition relishing such contrasts. Helena too is overshadowed by a dead father, "whose skill was almost as great as his honesty" [I.i.18–19], but she is able to leverage her inheritance to cure the King, win a husband, and vault into a higher social class. Bertram seems expected simply to take his father's place. "In delivering my son from me I bury a second husband," the Countess laments as he prepares to leave for court [I.i.1–2]. This odd remark is the play's opening line! Presumably, she means only that Bertram resembles her dead husband, but there are multiple kinds of resemblance, as he is continually reminded. "Be thou blessed, Bertram, and succeed thy father / In manners, as in shape," the Countess advises [I.i.61–2], in a farewell curiously reminiscent of Polonius's to

Laertes.[14] "Youth, thou bear'st thy father's face," the King says upon meeting him: "Frank nature, rather curious than in haste, / Hath well composed thee. Thy father's moral parts / Mayst thou inherit too!" [I.ii.19–22]. Is it any wonder Bertram is desperate to make his own name on a distant battlefield? Yet even this goal is denied him. "I shall stay here the forehorse to a smock, / "Creaking my shoes on the plain masonry, / Till honor be bought up, and no sword worn / But one to dance with," he gripes. "By heaven, I'll steal away!" [II.i.31–4].

Perhaps he would have—except within a day a girl from his childhood, scarcely more than a servant, arrives, performs a medical miracle, and without even first saying hello claims him for a prize! As Marjorie Garber writes [621]:

> Shakespeare's lovers appeal to us as much as they do in part because they seem to have the energy of their own passions; they choose partners with eager single-mindedness, and pursue their loves until, with good fortune (and a smiling playwright), they end in the promise of marriage. From Romeo and Juliet to Rosalind and Orlando, these lovers commit themselves to the fulfillment of individual choice, often against the strong resistance of their families. . . . Poor Bertram, then, that we should judge him so harshly for not wanting to marry the clever girl from the "middling" classes whom his mother has chosen for him.

Who can hear Bertram's immediate reaction to the pronounced marriage and not instinctively nod?

> *Helena:* This is the man.
> *King:* Why then, young Bertram, take her; she's thy wife.
> *Bertram:* My wife, my liege? I shall beseech your highness,
> In such a business give me leave to use
> The help of mine own eyes.
>
> [II.iii.103–7]

[14] Can you identify each speaker? 1) "Be checked for silence, / But never taxed for speech." 2) "Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment." Without question the Countess [I.i.67–8] is a more sympathetic figure, but she shares with *Hamlet*'s "tedious old fools" [II.ii.218] the delusion that a son on the verge of manhood will obey.

If Shakespeare had stopped here, it would have been easy to sympathize with Bertram, as we do with Romeo and Juliet, Hermia and Lysander—as we would for Helena were the situation reversed. But, as Garber dryly concludes, "the play does not go out of its way to make him a charmer" [621]. And Bertram swiftly proceeds to un-charm us. "Thou know'st she has raised me from my sickly bed," the King answers him, but in pointing out the irrelevancy of this statement Bertram reveals the true source of his objection: not frustrated agency but offended pride:

> But follows it, my lord, to bring me down
> Must answer for your raising? I know her well;
> She had her breeding at my father's charge.
> A poor physician's daughter my wife? Disdain
> Rather corrupt me ever!
>
> [II.iii.110–15]

The King gives Bertram a chance to respectfully reconsider. "'Tis only title thou disdain'st in her, the which / I can build up," he argues [II.iii.116–17], in a high-minded speech that, as we shall see, is riddled with contradictions no one present seems (or dares) to recognize. But when Bertram refuses to yield, the King smacks him down with threats:

> *King:* Obey our will, . . .
> Or I will throw thee from my care forever,
> Into the staggers and the careless lapse
> Of youth and ignorance, both my revenge and hate
> Loosing upon thee, in the name of justice,
> Without all terms of pity. Speak, thine answer.
> *Bertram:* Pardon, my gracious lord; for I submit
> My fancy to your eyes. When I consider
> What great creation and what dole of honor
> Flies where you bid it, I find that she, which late
> Was in my nobler thoughts most base, is now
> The praised of the king; who, so ennobled,
> Is as 'twere born so.
>
> [II.iii.157–72]

Were Bertram cleverer, I would suspect him of subtly mocking the King's shift in rhetoric. But I think he is simply playing the part expected of him; as we have seen, Bertram understands the

forms of courtly behavior. Yet, like Helena with the Countess, he also knows how to answer without saying everything:

> *King:* Take her by the hand,
> And tell her she is thine; to whom I promise
> A counterpoise, if not to thy estate,
> A balance more replete.
> *Bertram:* I take her hand.
>
> [II.iii.172–5]

This satisfies the King, and off they all march to the altar.

When Bertram re-enters, a short while later, he runs straight to Parolles, who has remained behind. To this point, we have seen Bertram converse mainly with his elders, people whom he is socially obligated to respect (or at least treat respectfully). He has no private speeches, and he engages with peers only once, when the Dumaine brothers depart for Italy and "brave wars" [II.i.25]. The young men seem genuinely to like each: "O, my sweet lord, that you will stay behind us!" the elder Dumaine exclaims [II.i.24]; "I grow to you, and our parting is a tortured body," Bertram replies [II.i.37–8]. I am willing to believe Bertram means this—in its simplicity, it's even moving—but Parolles has a different take. "Use a more spacious ceremony to the noble lords," he advises Bertram, after the others have exited:

> you have restrained yourself within the list of too cold an adieu. Be more expressive to them; for they wear themselves in the cap of the time; there do muster true gait, eat, speak, and move under the influence of the most received star; and though the devil lead the measure, such are to be followed. After them, and take a more dilated farewell.[15]
>
> [II.i.51–8]

Thus advised, Bertram obeys—the seemingly inconsequential moment early evidence of

[15] Parolles has already given a fine example, having urged the departing lords to "find in the regiment of the Spinii one Captain Spurio, with his cicatrix, an emblem of war, here on his sinister cheek." (The man is, no doubt, a cousin of Captain Spurious.) "It was this very sword entrenched it," Parolles continues; "say to him I live, and observe his reports for me" [II.i.41–6].

his biggest flaw: an utter inability to distinguish style from substance, dross from gold, which goes a long way toward explaining why Bertram is literally the only person in the play fooled by Parolles. But I think there is another reason. Everywhere he turns, Bertram is drenched in nostalgia: instructed not only to remember the past but to embody its values, to idealize old men who (to quote the King quoting Bertram's father) would rather be dead than "be the snuff / Of younger spirits, whose apprehensive senses / All but new things disdain; whose judgements are / Mere fathers of their garments; whose constancies / Expire before their fashions" [I.ii.58–63]. The King is not thinking specifically of Parolles here—they do not meet until the final scene—but he could hardly have suggested better lines to describe him. Of course Bertram would be attracted to a swaggerer who looks and sounds like no one else in his stifling world! To a fusty old lord like Lafew, Parolles' fashion is itself proof of his degeneracy: "Dost make hose of thy sleeves? Do other servants so?" he scoffs [II.iii.248–9].[16] To Bertram, those unorthodox sleeves must, like Italian battlefields, symbolize everything his upbringing has denied him.

And so, following his enforced marriage, Bertram turns for both comfort and counsel to Parolles. Despite their distance in class—roughly the same difference that Bertram finds so offensive in his new wife—they speak more like friends than like master and servant:

> *Bertram:* Undone, and forfeited to cares forever!
> *Parolles:* What's the matter, sweetheart?
> *Bertram:* Although before the solemn priest I have sworn,
> I will not bed her.
> *Parolles:* What? what, sweetheart?
> *Bertram:* O my Parolles, they have married me!
> I'll to the Tuscan wars and never bed her.
> *Parolles:* France is a doghole, and it no more merits
> The tread of a man's foot. To th' wars!
>
> [II.iii.265–73]

[16] Virtuous young people are similarly scornful: to Diana, who accepts her mother's morality without question, Parolles is "[t]hat jackanapes with scarfs" [III.v.84].

Bertram does admit one benefit of marriage: his wife's dowry, amply provided by the king, "[s]hall furnish me to those Italian fields / Where noble fellows strike" [II.iii.287–9]. Therefore, with several more "To th' wars," they go.

As with Helena, Fortune smiles on Bertram too in Italy. The Duke of Florence must be desperate indeed for soldiers: despite having no experience—not even, we may safely assume, a letter of recommendation from his king—Bertram is named general of the Florentine cavalry [III.iii.1]. Apparently he rewards the faith: "They say the French count has done most honorable service," Diana gossips; "It is reported that he has taken their great'st commander, and that with his own hand he slew the duke's brother," her mother agrees [III.v.3–7].

Away from battle, however, Bertram takes quite a few missteps. "This very day, / Great Mars, I put myself into thy file," he proclaims to the Duke: "Make me but like my thoughts, and I shall prove / A lover of thy drum, hater of love" [III.iii.8–11]. In fact, Bertram is eager for non-martial conquests. Wooing Diana, he is the stereotype of the untrustworthy lover every Shakespearean heroine knows to avoid. "Every night he comes / With musics of all sorts, and songs composed / To her unworthiness," the widow tells Helena. "It nothing steads us / To chide him from our eaves, for he persists / As if his life lay on't" [III.vii.39–43]. Yet according to Bertram, he hasn't been trying so hard: "I spoke with her but once / And found her wondrous cold," he tells the Dumaine brothers, "but I sent to her, / By [Parolles], / Tokens and letters, which she did resend, / And this is all I have done" [III.vi.108–12]. I'm inclined to believe him: when they speak a second time, he gets her name wrong!

> *Bertram:* They told me that your name was Fontybell.
> *Diana:* No, my good lord, Diana.
>
> [IV.ii.1–2]

Bertram proceeds to twist—or simply ignore—the meaning of "honest," further demonstrating his own ignorance of the word:[17]

> *Bertram:* You are no maiden, but a monument.
> When you are dead you should be such a one
> As you are now, for you are cold and stern;
> And now you should be as your mother was
> When your sweet self was got.
> *Diana:* She then was honest.
> *Bertram:* So should you be.
> *Diana:* No.
> My mother did but duty—such, my lord,
> As you owe to your wife.
>
> [IV.ii.6–13]

This is not a welcome digression. "No more o' that," he insists: "I was compelled to her, but I love thee / By love's own sweet constraint, and will forever / Do thee all rights of service" [IV.ii.13–17]. Remember these vows in the final scene, when Bertram tries to deny them. But Diana has been well trained in skepticism; her answers could be given without alteration to Juliet, Rosalind, Cressida—though ironically not to Helena herself:

> *Diana:* Ay, so you serve us
> Till we serve you; but when you have our roses,
> You barely leave our thorns to prick ourselves,
> And mock us with our bareness.
> *Bertram:* How have I sworn!
> *Diana:* 'Tis not the many oaths that makes the truth,
> But the plain single vow that is vowed true.
> . . . Therefore your oaths
> Are words, and poor conditions but unsealed—
> At least in my opinion.
>
> [IV.ii.17–31]

[17] The exchange also reveals Diana's dim view of sex: an effective contrast with Helena, whose physical desire for Bertram—"His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls" [I.i.96]—is obvious.

Finally, she comes to the point: if he wants to bed her, the price is his ring. Bertram is no more able to stand firm here than when pressed by the King of France to marry—though in fairness to Diana, she makes a better argument:

> *Bertram:* I'll lend it thee, my dear, but have no power
> To give it from me.
> *Diana:* Will you not, my lord?
> *Bertram:* It is an honor 'longing to our house,
> Bequeathed down from many ancestors,
> Which were the greatest obloquy i' th' world
> In me to lose.
> *Diana:* Mine honor's such a ring;
> My chastity's the jewel of our house,
> Bequeathed down from many ancestors,
> Which were the greatest obloquy i' th' world
> In me to lose. Thus your own proper wisdom
> Brings in the champion Honor on my part
> Against your vain assault.
> *Bertram:* Here, take my ring!
> My house, mine honor, yea, my life be thine,
> And I'll be bid by thee.
>
> [IV.ii.40–53]

Who remains so generous—or naïve—to believe Bertram means any of this? Not Diana, who promises, after he exits, to "lie with him" only when they're both dead [IV.ii.72–3]. But lest he benefit from the doubt: in the very next scene, having learned of Helena's (supposed) death and a just-concluded peace to end the war [IV.iii.37–59], Bertram boasts to the Dumaines of having "dispatched sixteen businesses, a month's length apiece," in preparation for returning home; in addition to the assignation with Diana (really Helena), these "businesses" include taking his leave of the Duke, arranging for transportation, and "mourning" his wife—an impressive night's work! The sex, he adds, "was the greatest, but that I have not ended yet" [IV.iii.84–91]. He then clarifies: "I mean the business is not ended, as fearing to hear of it hereafter" [IV.iii.95–6].

"Hereafter" is not long in coming, though first Parolles must be humiliated and proved a scoundrel—a scene I shall discuss in depth later. Meanwhile, back in France everyone has inexplicably forgotten to be angry at Bertram for his contemptuous treatment of Helena—whom they all believe dead! Much easier to blame Parolles for everything:

> *Lafew:* No, no, no, your son was misled with a snipped-taffeta fellow there, whose villainous saffron would have made all the unbaked and doughy youth of a nation in his color. Your daughter-in-law had been alive at this hour, and your son here at home, more advanced by the king than by that red-tailed humblebee I speak of.
> *Countess:* I would I had not known him; it was the death of the most virtuous gentlewoman that ever nature had praise for creating.
> [IV.v.1–10]

Never mind that youths ranging from the Dumaine brothers to Helena and Diana were not so stained or "misled." Lafew even proposes that his own daughter marry Bertram—who can't be wasted on widowerhood, apparently—and the King agrees! "His highness hath promised me to do it," Lafew tells the Countess, who also supports the idea; "and to stop up the displeasure he has conceived against your son there is no fitter matter" [IV.v.67–75]. Such delusions are our cue to look more closely at the play's older characters, with their flexible memories: long when desired, short when convenient, but always rose-colored. We'll start with the best of this class, a lady noteworthy less for anything she says or does than for her very existence:

The Countess

On the short list of Shakespearean mothers, the section for those who are unimpeachably good consists, so far as I can tell, of the Countess of Rossillion. (*The Winter's Tale*'s Hermione is also good, but her green-eyed husband impeaches her anyway, destroying their family until the miraculous ending.) True, the Countess's own son grows to manhood without assimilating any of

her (or his father's) virtues, but *All's Well* does not hold the parents responsible for the child's failings (an angle Shakespeare rarely takes anyway[18]).

The Countess has high hopes for Bertram, but though she is gobsmacked by his heel turn, there are hints from the start that she recognizes his shortcomings. In blessing his departure for France, she wishes that he might

> succeed thy father
> In manners, as in shape. Thy blood and virtue
> Contend for empire in thee, and thy goodness
> Share with thy birthright.
>
> [I.i.61–4]

In contrast, she unreservedly champions Helena, whose father "bequeathed" her to the noblewoman's care:

> I have those hopes of her good that her education promises. Her dispositions she inherits, which makes fair gifts fairer; for where an unclean mind carries virtuous qualities, there commendations go with pity—they are virtues and traitors too. In her they are the better for their simpleness. She derives her honesty and achieves her goodness.
>
> [I.i.37–44]

Does Bertram hear this (for the hundredth time, no doubt) and roll his eyes? Does Helena blush with embarrassment? Does the Countess even notice? The scene rolls on without noting anyone's reaction, but it's a key early moment for a production to establish how everyone in this blended family feels about each other.

The Countess is more sensitive to Helena in her next appearance; indeed, the old woman seems to identify with her lovely ward. Informed that Helena is pining for Bertram, the Countess reflects:

> Even so it was with me when I was young.
> If ever we are nature's, these are ours. This thorn

[18] Even King Lear, by any modern estimation an awful father, produced Cordelia as well as Goneril and Regan. In Shakespeare, villains are typically born, not made.

> Doth to our rose of youth rightly belong;
> Our blood to us, this to our blood is born.
> It is the show and seal of nature's truth,
> Where love's strong passion is impressed in youth.
> By our remembrances of days foregone,
> Such were our faults, or then we thought them none.
>
> [I.iii.124–31]

In her speech to Bertram, "blood" implies passion to be overcome: the core defect keeping him from truly resembling his noble father. In Helena, however, "blood" has a more nuanced meaning. Doubtless she would be happier were she not in love with Bertram, but it is an understandable fault, natural to youth: a passion to outgrow, as the Countess outgrew her own infatuation with some unnamed man—who, judging from her wistful tone, was not the Count. Yet in telling Helena, "you might be my daughter-in-law" [I.iii.163], the Countess all but encourages her to pursue Bertram, and when she learns of the marriage, she approves: "It hath happened all as I would have had it" [III.ii.1]. Might this be a bit of wish fulfillment? At least one person gets her heart's desire—but then, a happy marriage requires two hearts.

Some earlier lines are worth repeating here: "'Tis often seen / Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds / A native slip to us from foreign seeds" [I.iii.140–2]. The Countess was speaking in the context of her motherly love for Helena, but the connection between choice and affection applies to marital relations, too. And if choice breeds affection, then lack of choice breeds the opposite. We see this happen to Bertram, who exhibits no strong feelings either way for Helena until he is made her prize. The Countess never considers this, so she does not know how to respond to her son's disobedience. Initially, she tries to model stoicism, advising Helena:

> Think upon patience . . . .
> I have felt so many quirks of joy and grief
> That the first face of neither on the start
> Can woman me unto't.
>
> [III.ii.47–50]

Yet within fifteen lines, she has begun to embrace sorrow—and vindictiveness:

> I prithee, lady, have a better cheer.
> If thou engrossest all the griefs are thine,
> Thou robb'st me of a moiety. He was my son,
> But I do wash his name out of my blood,
> And thou art all my child.
>
> [III.ii.63–7]

Ten lines more, and she is in a full-blown rage:

> Nothing in France until he have no wife!
> There's nothing here that is too good for him
> But only she, and she deserves a lord
> That twenty such rude boys might tend upon
> And call her hourly mistress.
>
> [III.ii.77–81]

By rejecting his mother's choice, Bertram has, in a sense, rejected his mother. A husband's death is no preparation for that.

This tension between choice and duty—Bertram's duty to obey his mother, as well as his mother's duty to care for him—plays out in the Countess's conflicting feelings for Bertram and Helena, of course. But we also sense it in her lower-stakes conversations with the household fool, Lavatch, who rarely is found doing what he should. Shakespeare does not give Lavatch a reason for being onstage when we first meet him, but he seems to be loafing, for the Countess is not pleased to see him. "What does this knave here?" she exclaims:

> Get you gone, sirrah. The complaints I have heard of you I do not all believe. 'Tis my slowness that I do not; for I know you lack not folly to commit them, and have ability enough to make such knaveries yours.
>
> [I.iii.8–12]

Despite her displeasure, the Countess can't resist engaging with Lavatch; rather than shoo him offstage so she can hear from her steward (who is waiting to report what he learned eavesdropping on Helena), she takes all the bait the clown offers:

> *Lavatch:* ’Tis not unknown to you, madam, I am a poor fellow.
> *Countess:* Well, sir.
> *Lavatch:* No, madam, ’tis not so well that I am poor, though many of the rich are damned; but if I may have your ladyship’s good will to go to the world, Isbel the woman and I will do as we may.
> *Countess:* Wilt thou needs be a beggar?
> *Lavatch:* I do beg your good will in this case.
> *Countess:* In what case?
> *Lavatch:* In Isbel’s case and mine own.
>
> [I.iii.13–23]

It’s unclear whether Isbel is more than just a setup for the usual bawdry; she is mentioned only once more, when Lavatch declares he has lost interest (“I have no mind to Isbel since I was at court” [III.ii.12]). But the Countess seems genuinely interested in her servant’s love life, and she even tries to feed him his own medicine:

> *Countess:* Tell me thy reason why thou wilt marry.
> *Lavatch:* My poor body, madam, requires it; I am driven on by the flesh; and he must needs go that the devil drives.
> *Countess:* Is this all your worship’s reason?
> *Lavatch:* Faith, madam, I have other holy reasons, such as they are.
> *Countess:* May the world know them?
> *Lavatch:* I have been, madam, a wicked creature, as you and all flesh and blood are, and indeed I do marry that I may repent.
> *Countess:* Thy marriage, sooner than thy wickedness.
> *Lavatch:* I am out o’ friends, madam, and I hope to have friends for my wife’s sake.
> *Countess:* Such friends are thine enemies, knave.
>
> [I.iii.27–41]

Lavatch gives, per the Countess, a “foulmouthed and calumnious” reply [I.iii.55–6], but still she does not send him elsewhere: she dismisses her steward instead! Fortunately for the plot, he has a better idea:

> *Countess:* Get you gone, sir. I’ll talk with you more anon.
> *Steward:* May it please you, madam, that he bid Helen come to you. Of her I am to speak.
> *Countess:* Sirrah, tell my gentlewoman I would speak with her—Helen I mean.
>
> [I.iii.63–8]

Rather than obey, Lavatch sings about Helen of Troy—and the Countess rewards him with more attention. "You corrupt the song, sirrah," she notes, pointing out that his version—which concludes, "Among nine bad if one be good, / There's yet one good in ten."—reverses the traditional refrain [I.iii.69–80]. Lavatch answers by condemning the lack of good women in the world—"a man may draw his heart out ere a pluck one"—and only then, finally, does the Countess insist, "You'll be gone, sir knave, and do as I command you" [I.iii.81–9].

Their next scene together is amusingly similar. Helena has left for court, and the Countess wants Lavatch to follow with a message. (We never learn what it is, but likely she wants an update on Helena's attempt to heal the King.) "Come on, sir, I shall now put you to the height of your breeding," she tells Lavatch—implying that he had better behave. "I will show myself highly fed and lowly taught. I know my business is but to the court," the clown replies [II.ii.1–4]. The Countess asks him to clarify, and again the result is a multi-page digression from the business at hand:

> *Countess:* To the court? Why, what place make you special, when you put off that with such contempt? But to the court?
> *Lavatch:* Truly, madam, if God have lent a man any manners, he may easily put it off at court: he that cannot make a leg, put off's cap, kiss his hand, and say nothing, has neither leg, hands, lip, nor cap; and indeed such a fellow, to say precisely, were not for the court. But for me, I have an answer will serve all men.
> *Countess:* Marry, that's a bountiful answer that fits all questions.
> *Lavatch:* It is like a barber's chair that fits all buttocks—the pin buttock, the quatch buttock, the brawn buttock, or any buttock.
> . . .
> *Countess:* Have you, I say, an answer of such fitness for all questions?
> *Lavatch:* From below your duke to beneath your constable, it will fit any question.
> *Countess:* It must be an answer of most monstrous size that must fit all demands.
> [II.ii.5–32]

In *Filthy Shakespeare*, Pauline Kiernan connects Lavatch's "answer" to a return hit, or thrust, in fencing, a sport involving long, sharp swords ("pricks") . . . and her translation of the scene is even more pornographic than one might expect [75–6]:

> *Lavatch:* I have a prick that will serve the sexual needs of all.
> *Countess:* Goodness, that must be a bountiful cock if it fits all sexual demands.
> *Lavatch:* It's like a whore that fits all buttocks: the pointed-buttock, the fat-buttock, the fleshy-buttock, or any buttock.
> . . .
> *Countess:* Have you, then, a prick to fulfil all sexual practices?
> *Lavatch:* From on top of your duke to beneath your cunt, it will fit any genitals.
> *Countess:* It must be a cock of most monstrous size if it can fit all sexual holes.

I have trouble believing the Countess, sunk in grief and otherwise humorless, is intentionally making these puns—but the phrase "of most monstrous size" applied to a buttocks-obsessed clown seems a blaring signal that Shakespeare, at least, is having fun at this proper lady's expense. Regardless, she is unmistakably fascinated with Lavatch, who—like Parolles, but in a different register—speaks a language unlike anything else in her rarified orbit. Even as she acknowledges her own folly, she continues to play along. "To be young again, if we could!" she exclaims—if Kiernan is correct, wishing their play could be more than verbal: "I will be a fool in question, hoping to be the wiser by your answer" [II.ii.37–8]. The answer, when it finally comes, contains no wisdom: "O Lord, sir!" Lavatch repeats a half-dozen times, to satirize the vapidity of courtly conversation. With each reply, the Countess grows increasingly agitated . . . and, dare we say, aroused?

> *Countess:* I pray you, sir, are you a courtier?
> *Lavatch:* O Lord, sir!—There's a simple putting off. More, more, a hundred of them.
> *Countess:* Sir, I am a poor friend of yours, that loves you.
> *Lavatch:* O Lord, sir!—Thick, thick, spare not me.
> *Countess:* I think, sir, you can eat none of this homely meat.
> *Lavatch:* O Lord, sir!—Nay, put me to't, I warrant you.
> *Countess:* You were lately whipped, sir, as I think.

> *Lavatch:* O Lord, sir!—Spare not me.
> *Countess:* Do you cry "O Lord, sir!" at your whipping, and "Spare not me"?
> Indeed, your "O Lord, sir!" is very sequent to your whipping; you would answer very well to a whipping, if you were but bound to't.
>
> [II.ii.39–52]

These lines might have been lifted from an Elizabethan guide to BDSM! Could that really have been Shakespeare's intent? The house is empty with the Count buried and Bertram and Helena at court—why shouldn't the Countess toy with the idea of putting her own desires first? Alas, she pulls back before we can know for sure:

> *Countess:* I play the noble housewife with the time,
> To entertain it so merrily with a fool.
> *Lavatch:* O Lord, sir!—Why, there't serves well again.
> *Countess:* An end, sir! To your business: give Helen this,
> And urge her to a present answer back.
> Commend me to my kinsmen and my son.
> This is not much.
> *Lavatch:* Not much commendation to them?
> *Countess:* Not much employment for you. You understand me?
> *Lavatch:* Most fruitfully. I am there before my legs.
> *Countess:* Haste you again.
>
> [II.ii.55–66]

The next time she sees Lavatch, he delivers the letter announcing Bertram's flight to Italy, plunging the Countess into a tempest of feelings that leaves no space for cross-class curiosity; shortly thereafter, Helena sneaks away to follow him. But the initial shocks cannot overwhelm her essential identity: a mother who loves both her children—biological and adopted, worthy and unworthy—and who clings to the hope, however naïve, for a happy ending. "Write, write, Rinaldo, / To this unworthy husband of his wife," she tells a different servant:

> Let every word weigh heavy of her worth
> That he does weigh too light. My greatest grief,
> Though little he do feel it, set down sharply.
> Dispatch the most convenient messenger.
> When haply he shall hear that she gone,
> He will return; and hope I may that she,

> Hearing so much, will speed her foot again,
> Led hither by pure love. Which of them both
> Is dearest to me, I have no skill in sense
> To make distinction.
>
> [III.iv.29–40]

In a second half full of plotting and protestation, well-intentioned tricks and bald-faced lies, the Countess emerges as the most sincere, admirable figure. I have less patience for her two male contemporaries,

The King and Lafew

Two well-intentioned, honorable old men who ultimately are full of shit. As we have noted, the King is not just nostalgic: he longs for death. So disengaged is he from present concerns, he tells his subjects to join the war between Florence and Siena "on either part" [I.ii.13–15], not bothering to determine who is in the right or even why they're fighting. This is understandable to a point: he is dying from a disease with no apparent cure; the royal physicians, rather than helping, "have worn me out" [I.ii.73–4]; and he seems to have no family or loved ones at court.[19] Yet beneath this show of detachment is profound disappointment: he complains repeatedly of young, shallow lords chasing fashion and jesting without honor [I.ii.30–5 & 58–63]. Where exactly do these youths hang out, and what justifies the King's own scorn? Bertram, for all his faults, is no jester, and Parolles—whom the King does not even meet till the final scene—is no lord. The several unnamed lords offered as husbands to Helena all seem content to marry her [II.iii.75–97]—the surest sign of virtue in this play—and the Dumaine brothers prove as upstanding as any of the King's memories. His complaints seem less about the actual young men of France than his own frustration no longer to be one of them.

[19] The King tells Bertram, upon greeting him, "My son's no dearer" [I.ii.76], but there's no indication this son lives nearby, and we do not hear of him again.

When Helena cures him, his zest for life—and his need to control it—returns. “Why, he’s able to lead her a coranto,” Lafew exclaims as the pair dances onstage [II.iii.41–2]. Here is where the bullshit really starts to stink. When Bertram refuses to marry Helena, the King’s initial response is, per Goddard, “an utterance on the equality of man that would have satisfied . . . the most doctrinaire democrat of the eighteenth century” [41]. But even the opening lines of this utterance undermine any pretensions to equality, never mind democracy:

> ’Tis only title thou disdain’st in her, the which
> I can build up. Strange is it that our bloods,
> Of color, weight, and heat, poured all together,
> Would quite confound distinction, yet stands off
> In differences so mighty. If she be
> All that is virtuous—save what thou dislik’st,
> A poor physician’s daughter—thou dislik’st
> Of virtue for the name.
>
> [II.iii.116–23]

Strange it may be, but as the apex of this hierarchy of “differences”—with absolute power to “build up” (and, by extension, knock down) lesser individuals—the King has an existential interest in maintaining it, regardless of what anyone else might prefer. He is not, after all, proposing Helena is *equal* to Bertram: only that she is sufficiently virtuous to warrant promotion to his level. It goes without saying that Bertram, even if he desperately wanted to, would not be permitted to marry “a poor physician’s daughter” whose only title is “Miss” and only dowry is pharmacology. “If thou canst like this creature as a maid, / I can create the rest,” the King concludes. “Virtue and she / Is her own dower; honor and wealth from me” [II.iii.141–3].

When Bertram still says no, the King makes all this subtext explicit:

> My honor’s at the stake, which to defeat,
> I must produce my power. Here, take her hand,
> Proud scornful boy, unworthy this good gift,
> That dost in vile misprision shackle up
> My love and her desert; that canst not dream,

We, poising us in her defective scale,
Shall weigh thee to the beam; that wilt not know,
It is in us to plant thine honor where
We please to have it grow.

[II.iii.148–56]

Only twenty lines earlier, the King said, of Helena, "She is young, wise, fair; / In these to nature she's immediate heir; / And these breed honor" [II.iii.130–2]; he lectured to Bertram, "Honors thrive / When rather from our acts we them derive / Than our foregoers" [II.iii.134–6]. Whoops! Turns out honor comes not from youth, wisdom, fairness, or virtuous acts but from an old monarch "planting" his subjects where he pleases. Threats follow, and Bertram predictably relents.

Lafew's pomposities are played more for laughs. This is most evident in his commentary as Helena performs the choosing of her husband. Either Helena fails at the actor's most-basic job, to be heard, or Lafew—himself seemingly besotted with Helena—fails to listen; he misinterprets the scene at every step, reversing the roles of rejector and rejected:

Helena: Sir, will you hear my suit?
First Lord[20]*:* And grant it.
Helena: Thanks, sir, all the rest is mute.
Lafew [Aside]: I had rather be in this choice than throw amesace for my life.
Helena: The honor, sir, that flames in your fair eyes,
Before I speak, too threat'ningly replies.
Love make your fortunes twenty times above
Her that so wishes, and her humble love!
Second Lord: No better, if you please.
Helena: My wish receive,
Which great Love grant; and so I take my leave.
Lafew [Aside]: Do all they deny her? An they were sons of mine, I'd have them
whipped, or I would send them to th' Turk to make eunuchs of.

[II.iii.75–87]

[20] Despite the identical speech prefixes, this man—and the "Second Lord" who follows—is not one of the Dumaine brothers: they have already left for Italy.

Helena doesn't even give the third lord a chance to speak before dismissing him, but Lafew still gets it backward: "These boys are boys of ice; they'll none have her," he grumbles. "Sure they are bastards to the English; the French ne'er got 'em" [II.iii.92–4].

The rejection of a fourth lord elicits a more curious response from Lafew:

> *Helena:* You are too young, too happy, and too good,
> To make yourself a son out of my blood.
> *Fourth Lord:* Fair one, I think not so.
> *Lafew [Aside]:* There's one grape yet; I am sure thy father drunk wine. But if thou be'st not an ass, I am a youth of fourteen; I have known thee already.
> [II.iii.95–100]

The only lord left for Helena to address is Bertram, unquestionably an ass—but this can't be Lafew's meaning, can it? He resists that conclusion to the end, when, as noted, he blames Parolles for all Bertram's misdeeds and welcomes home the prodigal—Helena not yet cold in her imagined grave—by offering his own daughter as a consolation bride. I think the only coherent way to stage this moment is for Lafew to point his second sentence at the fourth lord, who thus becomes the "ass" to Bertram's "grape."[21]

Lafew is not always so obtuse, however. He takes the measure of Parolles almost immediately, though—as with the King, and the King's recollection of Bertram's father—Lafew's scorn rests heavily on his distaste for newfangled fashion:

> I did think thee, for two ordinaries, to be a pretty wise fellow; thou didst make tolerable vent of thy travel; it might pass. Yet the scarfs and the bannerets about thee did manifoldly dissuade me from believing thee a vessel of too great a burden. I have now found thee; when I lose thee again, I care not. Yet art thou good for nothing but taking up, and that thou'rt scarce worth.
> [II.iii.200–7]

[21] Alternatively, the line could be re-assigned to Parolles, who really has figured out Bertram's character, as we shall see.

This is enough to reduce Parolles to a sputtering rage. Alas, Lafew—somewhat like the Countess with Lavatch, though in a very different context—cannot stop himself, until the relentless barrage of insults shatters the fun:

> *Parolles:* My lord, you give me most egregious indignity.
> *Lafew:* Ay, with all my heart; and thou art worthy of it.
> *Parolles:* I have not, my lord, deserved it.
> *Lafew:* Yes, good faith, every dram of it, and I will not bate thee a scruple.
> *Parolles:* Well, I shall be wiser.
> *Lafew:* Ev'n as soon as thou canst, for thou hast to pull at a smack o' th' contrary. If ever thou be'st bound in thy scarf and beaten, thou shall find what it is to be proud of thy bondage. I have a desire to hold my acquaintance with thee, or rather my knowledge, that I may say, in the default, "He is a man I know."
> *Parolles:* My lord, you do me most insupportable vexation.
> *Lafew:* I would it were hell pains for thy sake, and my poor doing eternal; for doing I am past, as I will by thee, in what motion age will give me leave.
> [II.iii.215–32]

This ceases to be comedy: Parolles has not done anything (yet) to warrant such a beatdown, unless it's just that he exists. As the scene extends beyond any justifiable length—and similar ones follow—Shakespeare seems no longer to be dramatizing Lafew's hatred of Parolles but his own hatred of the type Parolles represents. Goddard traces this theme all the way back to what may have been Shakespeare's first comedy [44]:

> [*All's Well That Ends Well*] may be taken as a second and less clandestinely ironical *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the two gentlemen in this case of course being Bertram and Parolles . . . . Into [Parolles] Shakespeare seems to have poured something like his full abhorrence for the Renaissance gentleman on the French-Italian model, the spineless creature whose aim in life is to wear what is being worn, to say what is being said, and to do what is being done by those who "move under the influence of the most received star": to be a fashionmonger, in other words, a parrot, a parasite, a flatterer, an echo, a copy-cat, a so-say-I, a fool of time.

We hear Parolles the "parrot" at the very start of the scene, as Lafew remarks on the King's incredible recovery:

> *Lafew:* They say miracles are past, and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.
> *Parolles:* Why, 'tis the rarest argument of wonder that hath shot out in our latter times.
> *Bertram:* And so 'tis.
>
> [II.iii.1–9]

That is Bertram's only contribution to the discourse—he lacks either the interest or the desire to please—but Lafew has more to pontificate, if only Parolles would let him finish a thought!

> *Lafew:* Why, your dolphin is not lustier. 'Fore me, I speak in respect—
> *Parolles:* Nay, 'tis strange, 'tis very strange! that is the brief and the tedious of it; and he's of a most facinerious spirit that will not acknowledge it to be the—
> *Lafew:* Very hand of heaven—
> *Parolles:* Ay, so I say.
> *Lafew:* In a most weak—
> *Parolles:* And debile minister; great power, great transcendence, which should indeed give us a further use to be made than alone the recovery of the king, as to be—
> *Lafew:* Generally thankful.
>
> [II.iii.26–37]

If fashion were not enough, this irritating dialogue surely calcifies Lafew's animus toward Parolles. "You are not worth another word, else I'd call you knave," he finally snaps [II.iii.261–2], but the lord cannot stop thinking about the knave, or condemning him, or insulting him to his face. A few scenes later, Lafew tries to convince Bertram to see what is obvious to everyone else:

> *Lafew:* But I hope your lordship thinks not him a soldier.
> *Bertram:* Yes, my lord, and of very valiant approof.
> *Lafew:* You have it from his own deliverance.
> *Bertram:* And by other warranted testimony.
> *Lafew:* Then my dial goes not true; I took this lark for a bunting.
>
> [II.v.1–7]

On cue, Parolles strolls in; he and Bertram speak privately about Helena, until Lafew forces himself back into the conversation, to the bemusement of the younger men:

> *Lafew:* A good traveler is something at the latter end of a dinner; but one that lies three thirds and uses a known truth to pass a thousand nothings with, should be once heard and thrice beaten. God save you, captain.
> *Bertram:* Is there any unkindness between my lord and you, monsieur?
> *Parolles:* I know not how I have deserved to run into my lord's displeasure.
> *Lafew:* You have made shift to run into't, boots and spurs and all, like him that leapt into the custard; and out of it you'll run again rather than suffer question for your residence.
> *Bertram:* It may be you have mistaken him, my lord.
> *Lafew:* And shall do so ever, though I took him at's prayers.
>
> [II.v.27–41]

But Lafew is wrong, to his moral credit. He encounters Parolles again, late in the play, after Parolles has been thoroughly humiliated and ditched by Bertram. Lafew cannot entirely suppress his instinct to punch down:

> *Parolles:* My lord, I am a man whom Fortune hath cruelly scratched.
> *Lafew:* And what would you have me to do? 'Tis too late to pare her nails now. Wherein have you played the knave with Fortune that she should scratch you, who of herself is a good lady, and would not have knaves thrive long under her?
>
> [V.ii.26–32]

Satisfied that Parolles is chastened, Lafew gives him a coin. Parolles begs for more, slyly mixing humility with flattery, and Lafew—though he fights it—is compassionate, if not quite charmed:

> *Lafew:* Cox my passion! Give me your hand. How does your drum?[22]
> *Parolles:* O my good lord, you were the first that found me.
> *Lafew:* Was I, in sooth? And I was the first that lost thee.
> *Parolles:* It lies in you, my lord, to bring me in some grace, for you did bring me out.
> *Lafew:* Out upon thee, knave! Dost thou put upon me at once both the office of God and the devil? One brings thee in grace, and the other brings thee out. The king's coming; I know by his trumpets. Sirrah, inquire further after

[22] This is a reference to Parolles' signature failure on the Italian battlefield: the loss of his regiment's drum—a story Lafew likely heard from Bertram, who returned home the previous night.

> me; I had talk of you last night; though you are a fool and a knave, you shall eat. Go to; follow.
>
> *Parolles:* I praise God for you.
>
> [V.ii.40–54]

In the play's closing lines, Lafew again invites Parolles to follow—possibly into new livery: "Wait on me home; I'll make sport with thee," the old lord commands [V.iii.319]. It's been a precipitous fall for the would-be gentleman, yet he has survived, and he will be more comfortable as a willing fool than a soldier. Let us finally turn our attention to him,

Parolles

For all that he is ridiculed and despised by his betters, Parolles doesn't do anything *bad* for quite a while. The whole time he's in France, the worst that can be said is that he's pompous and self-absorbed—but then, so are the King and Lafew, and they are far less entertaining. Parolles even gets in a few good shots at Helena—I already quoted the best part of their banter on virginity—but he is an ungenerous scene partner, and his longwindedness grows tiresome:

> *Parolles:* It is not politic in the commonwealth of nature to preserve virginity. Loss of virginity is rational increase, and there was never virgin got till virginity was first lost. That you were made of is metal to make virgins. Virginity by being once lost may be ten times found; by being ever kept it is ever lost. 'Tis too cold a companion. Away with't!
>
> *Helena:* I will stand for't a little, though therefore I die a virgin.
>
> *Parolles:* There's little can be said in't; 'tis against the rule of nature. To speak on the part of virginity is to accuse your mothers, which is most infallible disobedience. He that hangs himself is a virgin; virginity murders itself, and should be buried in highways out of all sanctified limit, as a desperate offendress against nature. Virginity breeds mites, much like a cheese, consumes itself to the very paring, and so dies with feeding his own stomach. Besides, virginity is peevish, proud, idle, made of self-love, which is the most inhibited sin in the canon. Keep it not; you cannot choose but lose by't. Out with't! within the year it will make itself two, which is a goodly increase, and the principal itself not much the worse. Away with't!
>
> [I.i.127–50]

One wonders how often Parolles has delivered this exact speech to the object of his

lust—and whether it has ever succeeded. The energy is dampened by the repetition, a reliable tell that Parolles has exhausted his wit. We hear this again in his next speech, still harping on virginity: "'Tis a commodity will lose the gloss with lying: the longer kept, the less worth. Off with't while 'tis vendible" [I.i.154–6]. Another favorite trick is to claim to be above the fray when he is really just stumped for a retort, as with Helena:

> *Helena:* You go so much backward when you fight.
> *Parolles:* That's for advantage.
> *Helena:* So is running away when fear proposes the safety. But the composition that your valor and fear makes in you is a virtue of a good wing, and I like the wear well.
> *Parolles:* I am so full of businesses I cannot answer thee acutely.
> [I.i.199–206]

And with Lafew—repeatedly:

> *Lafew:* Are you companion to the Count Rossillion?
> *Parolles:* To any count; to all counts; to what is man.
> *Lafew:* To what is count's man; count's master is of another style.
> *Parolles:* You are too old, sir. Let it satisfy you, you are too old.
> *Lafew:* I must tell thee, sirrah, I write man, to which title age cannot bring thee.
> *Parolles:* What I dare too well do, I dare not do.
> [II.iii.191–9]

Sometimes Parolles remains stumped even *after* his target has exited: "I'll have no more pity of his age than I would have of—I'll beat him, an if I could but meet him again," he says of Lafew, who then re-enters [II.iii.237–8]; needless to say, the promised beating does not happen.

What makes Parolles not only tolerable but, dare I say, sympathetic is he turns out to recognize—and even regret—his faults. We learn this in Italy, after he fails to prevent the enemy from capturing his regiment's drum. The Dumaine brothers spot a perfect opportunity to prove to Bertram that Parolles is "a most notable coward, an infinite and endless liar, an hourly promise-breaker, the owner of no one good quality worthy your lordship's entertainment" [III.vi.9–12]. It doesn't take much to manipulate Parolles:

> *Bertram:* How now, monsieur? This drum sticks sorely in your disposition.
> *First Lord:* A pox on’t, let it go! ’tis but a drum.
> *Parolles:* But a drum? Is’t but a drum? A drum so lost! There was excellent command: to charge in with our horse upon our own wings and to rend our own soldiers!
> *First Lord:* That was not to be blamed in the command of the service; it was a disaster of war that Caesar himself could not have prevented if he had been there to command.
> *Bertram:* Well, we cannot greatly condemn our success. Some dishonor we had in the loss of that drum, but it is not to be recovered.
> *Parolles:* It might have been recovered.
> *Bertram:* It might, but it is not now.
> *Parolles:* It is to be recovered.
>
> [III.vi.42–58]

One more goading speech by Bertram—who, it must be noted, does a good job turning the screws—and Parolles declares he will take back the drum, by himself, this night [III.vi.61–74]! He marches bravely off, but re-enters shortly thereafter, fully aware that he has made a big mistake. Believing himself to be alone, he contemplates his predicament:

> Ten o’clock. Within these three hours ’twill be time enough to go home. What shall I say I have done? It must be a very plausive invention that carries it. They begin to smoke me, and disgraces have of late knocked too often at my door. I find my tongue is too foolhardy; but my heart hath the fear of Mars before it, and of his creatures, not daring the reports of my tongue. . . . What the devil should move me to undertake the recovery of this drum, being not ignorant of the impossibility, and knowing I had no such purpose?
>
> [IV.i.24–35]

His instinct is not to be wiser but to lie bigger—though this course too frightens him:

> I must give myself some hurts and say I got them in exploit; yet slight ones will not carry it. They will say, “Came you off with so little?” And great ones I dare not give. Wherefore, what’s the instance? Tongue, I must put you into a butterwoman’s mouth, and buy myself another of Bajazeth’s mule, if you prattle me into these perils.
>
> [IV.i.35–42]

Unfortunately for Parolles, he is not really alone: the Second Lord and a half-dozen soldiers are hiding nearby, waiting in ambush and hearing everything he mutters. “Is it possible he should know what he is, and be that he is?” the Second Lord wonders [IV.i.43–4]—a good question (though he might ask a similar one of Bertram: is it possible the Count should be that he is, and not know it?). Eventually, the soldiers seize Parolles from behind and blindfold him, all the while speaking nonsensically so as to seem like an enemy force. Parolles’ *first offer*, before he has even learned what his captors want, is treasonous:

> I know you are the Muskos’ regiment,
> And I shall lose my life for want of language.
> If there be here German, or Dane, Low Dutch,
> Italian, or French, let him speak to me,
> I’ll discover that which shall undo the Florentine.
>
> [IV.i.69–73]

The soldiers lock up Parolles until the First Lord returns with Bertram, who is off wooing Fontybell . . . er, Diana. When Bertram arrives, he has already changed his tune on Parolles. “Come, bring forth this counterfeit module has deceived me like a double-meaning prophesier,” he demands [IV.iii.97–9], though he seems less concerned about the deceit than about damage to his own reputation. “And what think you he hath confessed?” the Second Lord asks. “Nothing of me, has a?” Bertram replies [IV.iii.110–11], then continues to fret as Parolles is dragged on: “A plague upon him! muffled! He can say nothing of me” [IV.iii.115–16]. Ah, but he can—and does—though not before slandering the entire Florentine army. The cavalry, Parolles claims, consists of “[f]ive or six thousand, but very weak and unserviceable. The troops are all scattered, and the commanders very poor rogues” [IV.iii.130–2]; the infantry “amounts not to fifteen thousand poll, half of the which dare not shake the snow from off their cassocks, lest they shake themselves to pieces” [IV.iii.164–7].

Might Parolles be derogating his comrades as a ruse, to give the enemy false confidence and thereby lure them into a trap? This seems unlikely, given what follows. Prompted by the First Lord, Parolles is asked about Captain Dumaine (i.e., the First Lord): “what his reputation is with the duke; what his valor, honesty, and expertness in wars; or whether he thinks it were not possible, with well-weighing sums of gold, to corrupt him to a revolt” [IV.iii.172–7]. The play gives us ample reason to think highly of both Dumaine brothers: neither seems cowardly or corruptible. Parolles is surely lying when he replies, “A was a botcher’s prentice in Paris, from whence he was whipped for getting the shrieve’s fool with child—a dumb innocent, that could not say him nay” [IV.iii.182–5]. But these absurdly specific lies are just a warm-up. Instructed to say more, Parolles gives the funniest speech since his Act One disquisitions on virginity, a bravura performance of character assassination:

> He will steal, sir, an egg out of a cloister. For rapes and ravishments he parallels Nessus. He professes not keeping of oaths; in breaking ’em he is stronger than Hercules. He will lie, sir, with such volubility that you would think truth were a fool; drunkenness is his best virtue, for he will be swine-drunk, and in his sleep he does little harm, save to his bedclothes about him; but they know his conditions and lay him in straw. I have but little more to say, sir, of his honesty: he has everything that an honest man should not have; what an honest man should have, he has nothing.
> [IV.iii.245–55]

Later in the scene, Parolles describes the Second Lord as “not altogether so great as the first in goodness, but greater a great deal in evil. He excels his brother for a coward, yet his brother is reputed one of the best that is. In a retreat he outruns any lackey; marry, in coming on he has the cramp” [IV.iii.279–83]. One doesn’t say such things about men one merely dislikes: Parolles, it seems, *hates* the Dumaine brothers. But why should anyone hate such unobjectionable fellows—unless their virtues are glaring reminders of one’s own failings? Serene in his own decency, the First Lord can only marvel at Parolles’ rants. “I begin to love him

for this," he tells Bertram. "For this description of thine honesty?" Bertram spits back. "A pox upon him! For me, he's more and more a cat" [IV.iii.256–8].

Like his friends, Bertram has just heard himself vilified, but he cannot so easily shrug off the insults. Of course, Parolles is not tellings lies about Bertram, whose name comes up only after the discovery of a letter that begins, "Dian, the count's a fool, and full of gold" [IV.iii.207]. Parolles explains:

> that is an advertisement to a proper maid in Florence, one Diana, to take heed of the allurement of one Count Rossillion, a foolish idle boy, but for all that very ruttish. . . . My meaning in't, I protest, was very honest in the behalf of the maid; for I knew the young count to be a dangerous and lascivious boy, who is a whale to virginity, and devours up all the fry it finds.
>
> [IV.iii.208–17]

As Diana can (and shall) confirm, this is a fair description of Bertram, though Parolles seems to have been fruitlessly courting her as well. The soldier pretending to interpret between Parolles and his captors reads aloud the letter, humiliating Bertram alongside his erstwhile companion:

> "When he swears oaths, bid him drop gold, and take it;
> After he scores, he never pays the score.
> Half-won is match well made; match, and well make it;
> He ne'er pays after-debts, take it before.
> And say a soldier, Dian, told thee this:
> Men are to mell with, boys are not to kiss.
> For count of this, the count's a fool, I know it,
> Who pays before, but not when he does owe it,
> Thine, as he vowed to thee in thine ear,
> Parolles."
>
> [IV.iii.219–28]

Setting aside questions of goodness or morality, one measure of a character's value in Shakespeare—their ability to hold our attention and win our affection—is their inventiveness with language. I would not want any part of a real-life Parolles, but he is welcome onstage every time. Helena transcends our discomfort with her means, and disapproval of her ends, because we

want to hear what she says. Even the First and Second Lords, though denied individual names, stand apart from other courtiers and soldiers thanks to lines such as "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together" [IV.iii.70–1] and "This is Monsieur Parolles, the gallant militarist—that was his own phrase—that had the whole theoric of war in the knot of his scarf, and the practice in the chape of his dagger" [IV.iii.139–42]. What then should we make of Bertram's answers to Parolles' attacks? Here is everything he says—this handsome young aristocrat who has been given every advantage, including (from all evidence) two loving parents—from the finding of the letter through the end of the scene:

- "Damnable both-sides rogue!"
- "He shall be whipped through the army with this rhyme in's forehead."
- "I could endure anything before but a cat, and now he's a cat to me."
- "For this description of thine honesty? A pox upon him! For me, he's more and more a cat."
- "A pox on him! He's a cat still."
- And finally, upon confronting Parolles, whose blindfold has been removed: "Good morrow, noble captain."

[IV.iii.218, 229–30, 233–4, 257–8, 268 & 304]

This, frankly, is pathetic. Bertram's utter lack of imagination should forever bar him from associating with, never mind marrying, such a luminary as Helena. Regrettably for the Count, he still has not hit bottom.

Before we get there, let's linger with Parolles. "Who cannot be crushed with a plot?" he howls [IV.iii.315], as Bertram, the Dumaine brothers, and even the pretend interpreter take their parting shots. Left alone to reflect, however, he is equanimous—and honest:

> Yet am I thankful. If my heart were great,
> 'Twould burst at this. Captain I'll be no more,
> But I will eat and drink and sleep as soft
> As captain shall. Simply the thing I am
> Shall make me live. Who knows himself a braggart,
> Let him fear this; for it will come to pass
> That every braggart shall be found an ass.
> Rust, sword! cool, blushes! and, Parolles, live

Safest in shame; being fooled, by foolery thrive.
There's place and means for every man alive.
I'll after them.

[IV.iii.320–30]

By the curtain, as we saw, Parolles seems to have won himself a position in the service of Lafew, who likes the fool much better now that he has accepted his place in the social order. Not my favorite moral, but then Shakespeare wasn't writing for an audience of 21st-century liberals. If Goddard is correct, Parolles was intended to represent everything that offended Shakespeare's sensibilities. Yet like so many comic triumphs, Parolles seems to have gotten away from his creator. He never threatens—like, say, Mercutio or Plump Jack—to "steal" the play. But he refuses to play the merely contemptible role scripted for him, and he is never—God forbid—dull. He earns his tumble down society's ladder as thoroughly as Helena earns her climb up. Why is it so difficult to say who gets the better end?

Which brings us to . . .

The Final Scene

Act Five, Scene Three takes place in the Countess's palace, where the King and Lafew are visiting, and to which Bertram has returned, following the report of Helena's death. "We lost a jewel of her, and our esteem / Was made much poorer by it," the King begins, then turns to the Countess:

King: but your son,
As mad in folly, lacked the sense to know
Her estimation home.
Countess: 'Tis past, my liege,
And I beseech your majesty to make it
Natural rebellion, done i' th' blade of youth,
When oil and fire, too strong for reason's force,
O'erbears it and burns on.
King: My honored lady,
I have forgiven and forgotten all,

> Though my revenges were high bent upon him,
> And watched the time to shoot.
>
> [V.iii.1–11]

Let us recall what "revenges" the King means. "Obey our will," he ordered Bertram, way back in Act Two, when the rebellious youth refused to marry Helena,

> Or I will throw thee from my care forever,
> Into the staggers and the careless lapse
> Of youth and ignorance, both my revenge and hate
> Loosing upon thee, in the name of justice,
> Without all terms of pity.
>
> [II.iii.157–65]

That's quite a change! Consider, though, that the King's earlier fury was triggered by the threat of defiance. The King did not order Bertram to be loving or even loyal to Helena, only to wed her—thereby validating her rise to the topmost stratum (and affirming the King's faith in her); from this perspective, Bertram did his duty and there is nothing to avenge. Yet everyone also believes Bertram's failure to appreciate what he had been given (they do not yet know about his attempted adultery) resulted in an irreparable tragedy. Shouldn't Bertram at least be expected to show remorse for Helena's death? To demonstrate growth?

Apparently not! Apparently, the King need not even *see* Bertram to proclaim confidently:

> We are reconciled, and the first view shall kill
> All repetition. Let him not ask our pardon;
> The nature of his great offense is dead,
> And deeper than oblivion we do bury
> Th' incensing relics of it.
>
> [V.iii.21–5]

Likewise, Lafew did not bother to speak to Bertram before welcoming him as a son-in-law. The entire existence of Lafew's daughter seems like an unconvincing retcon by Shakespeare. We first hear of her late in Act Four, as Lafew unfolds the plot to the Countess:

> And I was about to tell you, since I heard of [Helena's] death, and that my lord your son was upon his return home, I moved the king my master to speak in the behalf of my daughter; which, in the minority of them both, his majesty out of a self-gracious remembrance did first propose.
>
> [IV.v.67–72]

You'd think someone might have pointed out, before Bertram married Helena, that he was kinda sorta already engaged. Bertram, when he finally enters in Act Five, goes even further in rewriting history:

> *King:* You remember
> The daughter of this lord?
> *Bertram:* Admiringly, my liege. At first
> I stuck my choice upon her, ere my heart
> Durst make too bold a herald of my tongue;
> Where the impression of mine eye infixing,
> Contempt his scornful perspective did lend me,
> Which warped the line of every other favor,
> Scorned a fair color or expressed it stol'n,
> Extended or contracted all proportions
> To a most hideous object. Thence it came
> That she whom all men praised, and whom myself,
> Since I have lost, have loved, was in mine eye
> The dust that did offend it.
>
> [V.iii.42–55]

Not the most coherent verse Shakespeare ever composed (though perhaps that's intentional, given its absurdity): Bertram seems to be claiming he rejected Helena ("she whom all praised") not because she was "a poor physician's daughter" or a "clog" keeping him from adventure, but because he secretly, silently loved another—so silently, in fact, he never bothered to mention her before. (We learn her name, Maudlin, only when the King calls for her to appear [V.iii.68]—which she never does.) No matter—the King eats it up! "Well excused," he nods to Bertram; "That thou didst love her strikes some scores away / From the great compt" [V.iii.55–7]. Then, as though realizing Helena's memory demands more, he starts to moralize:

> But love that comes too late,

Like a remorseful pardon slowly carried,
To the great sender turns a sour offense,
Crying "That's good that's gone."

[V.iii.57–60]

He drones on a while longer, then abruptly declares, "Be this sweet Helen's knell, and now forget her" [V.iii.67]. This attitude—from a man who spent forty lines at the start of the play memorializing Bertram's dead father—suggests the King is as eager as Bertram to bury his own mistakes with Helena. But the past cannot so easily be forgotten, and the prospect of a happy ending quickly darkens. Urged to "[s]end forth your amorous token for fair Maudlin" [V.iii.68], Bertram gives Lafew a ring—the same one, it soon turns out, that Helena (posing as Diana) gave him after consummating their marriage. Suddenly, the old folks can't stop remembering Helena:

Lafew: By my old beard
And every hair that's on't, Helen that's dead
Was a sweet creature; such a ring as this,
The last that e'er I took her leave at court,
I saw upon her finger.
Bertram: Hers it was not.
King: Now pray you let me see it; for mine eye,
While I was speaking, oft was fastened to't.
This ring was mine, and when I gave it Helen
I bade her, if her fortunes ever stood
Necessitied to help, that by this token
I would relieve her.[23] Had you that craft to reave her
Of what should stead her most?
Bertram: My gracious sovereign,
Howe'er it pleases you to take it so,
The ring was never hers.
Countess: Son, on my life,
I have seen her wear it, and she reckoned it
At her life's rate.

[23] Like the intimacy that Bertram and Maudlin supposedly share, this is another crucial detail that Shakespeare shoehorns retroactively into the plot—though it would not have been difficult to insert it earlier. It boggles my mind that a playwright as experienced as Shakespeare at this stage in his career would have constructed such a shoddy final scene. Perhaps this is evidence that, as some have proposed [e.g., Asimov, 606], the script we have is a revision of an earlier play.

Lafew: I am sure I saw her wear it.

[V.iii.76–91]

Bertram continues to insist his ring is different, using the lie as an opportunity to feign faithfulness:

> You are deceived, my lord; she never saw it.
> In Florence was it from a casement thrown me,
> Wrapped in a paper, which contained the name
> Of her that threw it. Noble she was, and thought
> I stood engaged; but when I had subscribed
> To mine own fortune, and informed her fully
> I could not answer in that course of honor
> As she had made the overture, she ceased
> In heavy satisfaction, and would never
> Receive the ring again.

[V.iii.92–101]

But the King is not fooled: in a shockingly short time he moves from doubting Bertram to calling him a liar [V.iii.113] to ordering his arrest on suspicion of Helena's murder [V.iii.120]. Here we should remember what Diana (at Helena's prompting) told Bertram, back in Act Four, when setting the trap he is now caught in. He had just given her his own ring, that ostensibly precious heirloom, and she replied:

> When you have conquered my yet maiden bed,
> Remain there but an hour, nor speak to me;
> My reasons are most strong, and you shall know them
> When back again this ring shall be delivered.
> And on your finger in the night I'll put
> Another ring, that what in time proceeds
> May token to the future our past deeds.

[IV.ii.57–63]

In other words, Diana explicitly told Bertram the ring's purpose: to corroborate their consummated relationship. (He did, after all, promise to marry her.) The question then begs itself: Bertram clearly didn't intend to acknowledge this dalliance (except for bragging to his buddies), so why did he keep the ring? Why choose it for Maudlin as his "token" of marriage?

(Both the King and Diana use the same word.) The Count of Rossillion doesn't have other jewelry on hand?

Instead, the ring becomes one more symbol of Bertram's arrogance and entitlement. Regarding the seemingly miniscule chance that Diana—a dowerless nobody from a distant land—might follow him back to France and make her claim, he took for granted that everyone would believe him over her. And when Diana—accompanied by her mother—makes her inevitable entrance, he is stunned to find the opposite happening:

> *Diana:* Why do you look so strange upon your wife?
> *Bertram:* She's none of mine, my lord.
> *Diana:* If you shall marry,
> You give away this hand, and that is mine;
> You give away heaven's vows, and those are mine;
> You give away myself, which is known mine;
> For I by vow am so embodied yours
> That she which marries you must marry me—
> Either both or none.
> *Lafew:* Your reputation comes too short for my daughter; you are no husband for her.
> *Bertram:* My lord, this is a fond and desp'rate creature,
> Whom sometime I have laughed with; let your highness
> Lay a more noble thought upon mine honor
> Than for to think that I would sink it here.
> *King:* Sir, for my thoughts, you have them ill to friend
> Till your deeds gain them. Fairer prove your honor
> Than in my thought it lies!
>
> [V.iii.167–83]

Emboldened, Diana drops the heightened rhetoric and speaks bluntly: "Good my lord," she entreats the King, "Ask him upon his oath if he does think / He had not my virginity" [V.iii.183–5]. In his desperation to save himself, Bertram crosses the line from shameful to despicable. "She's impudent, my lord," he cries, "And was a common gamester to the camp" [V.iii.186–7]. But Diana is more poised and prepared than her flailing accuser, and she knows exactly how to counterstrike:

Diana: He does me wrong, my lord. If I were so,
He might have bought me at a common price.
Do not believe him. O, behold this ring,
Whose high respect and rich validity
Did lack a parallel; yet for all that
He gave it to a commoner o' th' camp,
If I be one.
Countess: He blushes, and 'tis hit.
Of six preceding ancestors, that gem,
Conferred by testament to th' sequent issue,
Hath it been owed and worn. This is his wife;
That ring's a thousand proofs.

[V.iii.188–98]

But the King wants more proof, and so Parolles—who has been noted hanging around—is called forth. Bertram (rightly) objects that Parolles can't be trusted: "Am I or that or this for what he'll utter, / That will speak anything" [V.iii.207–8]. Bertram then reminds everyone that he too "will speak anything," doubling down on his slander of Diana:

Certain it is I liked her,
And boarded her i' th' wanton way of youth.
She knew her distance and did angle for me,
Madding my eagerness with her restraint—
As all impediments in fancy's course
Are motives of more fancy—and in fine
Her infinite cunning with her modern grace
Subdued me to her rate. She got the ring,
And I had that which any inferior might
At market price have bought.

[V.iii.209–18]

This is as unconvincing as it is bananas—Diana's "restraint" is to blame for Bertram's infidelity? She then demands he return *her* ring—the same ring that everyone else has already recognized as *Helena's*, but that Diana now claims to have given Bertram in bed. Before the King can untangle this latest twist, however, Parolles enters.

Charged to tell what he knows of Bertram and Diana, Parolles is, from the King's perspective, aggravatingly equivocal—yet anyone with an ear for irony can hear the truth in what he says:

> *Parolles:* So please your majesty, my master hath been an honorable gentleman. Tricks he hath had in him, which gentlemen have.
> *King:* Come, come, to th' purpose. Did he love this woman?
> *Parolles:* Faith, sir, he did love her; but how?
> *King:* How, I pray you?
> *Parolles:* He did love her, sir, as a gentleman loves a woman.
> *King:* How is that?
> *Parolles:* He loved her, sir, and loved her not.
> *King:* As thou art a knave, and no knave.
>
> [V.iii.237–48]

Diana presses him for clarity, and Parolles' reply suggests he may really have learned something from his Italian humiliation:

> *Diana:* Do you know he promised me marriage?
> *Parolles:* Faith, I know more than I'll speak.
>
> [V.iii.253–4]

For most of the play, Parolles excelled at speaking more than he knew; committing to the opposite tack would be growth indeed. Alas for Bertram, Parolles has one more speech in him; if he doesn't quite tell all, as the King would have, he confirms enough:

> *King:* But wilt thou not speak all thou know'st?
> *Parolles:* Yes, so please your majesty. I did go between them as I said; but more than that, he loved her—for indeed he was mad for her, and talked of Satan and of Limbo and of Furies and I know not what. Yet I was in that credit with them at that time that I knew of their going to bed, and of other motions, as promising her marriage, and things which would derive me ill will to speak of; therefore I will not speak what I know.
> *King:* Thou hast spoken all already, unless thou canst say they are married; but thou art too fine in thy evidence; therefore stand aside.
>
> [V.iii.255–66]

Parolles' final words in the play ought to seal Bertram's fate. But the waters are re-muddied when Diana, carrying out Helena's inscrutable plan—or perhaps on a whim, to steal back the focus—makes a sudden and bizarre show of contradicting herself:

> *King:* This ring you say was yours?
> *Diana:* Ay, my good lord.
> *King:* Where did you buy it? or who gave it you?
> *Diana:* It was not given me, nor I did not buy it.
> *King:* Who lent it you?
> *Diana:* It was not lent me neither.
> *King:* Where did you find it then?
> *Diana:* I found it not.
> *King:* If it were yours by none of all these ways,
> How could you give it him?
> *Diana:* I never gave it him.
>
> [V.iii.267–73]

This last line is true: Helena, posing as Diana, gave Bertram her own ring in bed. But Diana undeniably said the opposite earlier in the scene:

> *King:* What ring was yours, I pray you?
> *Diana:* Sir, much like
> The same upon your finger.
> *King:* Know you this ring? This ring was his of late.
> *Diana:* And this was it I gave him, being abed.
>
> [V.iii.224–7]

I have thought and thought about this until I'm no longer sure which ring is which—there are so many references in this interminable scene—and I cannot fathom why Shakespeare gave Diana so perverse a twist. If she is just playing the part Helena assigned her, did Helena not consider the real-life risks of pissing off a king? What does that say for our heroine's conscience?

> *King:* Take her away, I do not like her now;
> To prison with her, and away with him.
> Unless thou tell'st me where thou hadst this ring,
> Thou diest within this hour.
> *Diana:* I'll never tell you.

King: Take her away.

[V.iii.278–82]

I'll never tell you? This is *insane* behavior! And Diana isn't done: she still must give Helena her entrance cue, though she can't do this straightforwardly either, milking every last moment in the spotlight. But at long, long last—metaphorically risen from the dead—the author of all this confusion appears to resolve it:

> *Diana:* The jeweler that owes the ring is sent for,
> And he shall surety me.[24] . . .
> Dead though she be, she feels her young one kick.
> So there's my riddle: one that's dead is quick—
> And now behold the meaning.
> *Enter Helena and Widow.*
> *King:* Is there no exorcist
> Beguiles the truer office of mine eyes?
> Is't real that I see?
> *Helena:* No, my good lord,
> 'Tis but the shadow of a wife you see,
> The name and not the thing.
> *Bertram:* Both, both; O, pardon!

[V.iii.293–305]

Considering the build-up, the play now speeds to its conclusion: from Helena's entrance to the brief epilogue is only 29 lines. Bertram's immediate reaction, begging her pardon, is interesting: is he sincere or just shocked? (At least thankful, I'm sure, no longer to be suspected of murder.) The ensuing dialogue is not encouraging:

> *Helena:* O my good lord, when I was like this maid
> I found you wondrous kind. There is your ring,
> And look you, here's your letter. This it says:
> "When from my finger you can get this ring,
> And are by me with child," etc. This is done.
> Will you be mine, now you are doubly won?
> *Bertram:* If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly,
> I'll love her dearly—ever, ever dearly.
> *Helena:* If it appear not plain, and prove untrue,

[24] Another strange choice: she means Helena, so why *he*?

> Deadly divorce step between me and you.
>
> [V.iii.306–15]

A pair of conditionals, culminating in “Deadly divorce,” do not engender hope that either understands marriage as something more than the fulfilling (or rejecting) of provisos. Absent genetic testing, accepting the paternity of a child is fundamentally an act of faith—one that precious few of Shakespeare’s men, regardless of genre, are comfortable embracing. Why should we assume Bertram will be the exception? Conversely, can we imagine Helena conceding her version of events (though true) to be anything but “plain”?

Three more conditionals follow, each further eroding the grounds for a happy ending. First, the King remembers Diana:

> If thou beest yet a fresh uncropped flower,
> Choose thou thy husband, and I’ll pay thy dower;
> For I can guess that by thy honest aid
> Thou kept’st a wife herself, thyself a maid.
>
> [V.iii.323–6]

The King has forgotten that forcing marriage on a young man of his court is how the problems started in the first place. For that matter, he’s forcing marriage on Diana, who only a few scenes earlier had avowed, “Since Frenchman are so braid, / Marry that will, I live and die a maid” [IV.ii.73–4]. No matter: like chaste Isabella in the forthcoming *Measure for Measure*, Diana is not permitted a response to her last-minute engagement.

The King then concludes the scene:

> Of that and all the progress more and less
> Resolvedly more leisure shall express.
> All yet seems well, and if it end so meet,
> The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet.
>
> [V.iii.327–30]

As I have been arguing, I don’t think much even *seems* well here, but regardless that word is doing heavy lifting. All that remains is the epilogue, spoken by the actor who played the King:

> The king's a beggar, now the play is done.
> All is well ended if this suit be won,
> That you express content; which we will pay
> With strife to please you, day exceeding day.
> Ours be your patience then, and yours our parts;
> Your gentle hands lend us, and take our hearts.
>
> [V.iii.331–6]

Is this Shakespeare's acknowledgement that the fiction of Helena and Bertram cannot plausibly end well? What really matters, when the actors take their bows, is a satisfied audience. Are we? Is contentment possible if it means applauding Helena's taste in men or Bertram's consequence-free comeuppance? These two might be the least ambivalent of all Shakespeare's romantic leads—the problem is their uncomplicated feelings for each other are opposed. And so we clap because we're polite, or even entertained, but I daresay the strife we've witnessed does not please us.

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