

All's [Not] Well:
Female Service and 'Vendible' Virginity
in Shakespeare's Problem Play

Emily C. Gerstell
University of Pennsylvania (<gerstell@sas.upenn.edu>)

Abstract

The article examines the economics of female service in William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, paying particular attention to the role Helena plays as mistress to the Widow Capilet and Diana. Such a focus reveals that what lies at the heart of *All's Well* is not only, as previous scholarship has suggested, a battle between the sexes but also an intense focus on class and money. By examining both the ties between women and the ties between men that Helena forges and strengthens, I demonstrate that issues of economics and self-interest govern not only male-female relationships but also those between women. In particular, such attention highlights the role that service – conceived of as both economic and sexual – plays in driving the action and the 'problem' of *All's Well*.

Keywords: *All's Well That Ends Well*, Feminist Criticism, Gender, Service, Shakespeare

1. *Introduction*

Until recently, the protagonist of *All's Well That Ends Well* failed to inspire the kind of critical admiration that the plucky, cross-dressing heroines of Shakespeare's other comedies (Viola, Portia, Rosalind) enjoyed.¹ Instead, Helena was derided by eighteenth-century critics as 'cruel, artful, and insolent' (Lennox 1753, 192) and dismissed as 'untrue to her sex' by nineteenth-century scholars for her 'unwomanly' actions, particularly her pursuit of a man so much higher than her in rank (Lounsbury 1908, 390). Frederick Boas, who coined and applied the term 'problem play' to *All's Well*, summed up one

¹ S.T. Coleridge (1907, 83) and G.B. Shaw (Wilson 1961, 7) were lone admirers. This article is an expanded and revised version of a paper discussed at the Shakespeare Association of America conference (Boston, 5-7 April 2012).



traditional view when he wrote that Helena ‘lacks the superb air of distinction which stamps Shakespeare’s heroines. She is, to say the truth, in the eyes of a generation unfamiliar with the feudal doctrine of service, a trifle *bourgeoise*’ (1900, 351-352).² Helena’s determination to lose her virginity and her bawdy sparring with Parolles only added to the offense.

Small wonder, then, that feminist criticism of the late twentieth century found in Helena and the Florentine women a cause it could champion, for the dismissals of Helena appeared predicated on the belief that sexually desirous women were ‘bad’. For Carolyn Asp and others, Helena’s agency was inextricably linked to the play’s classification as a ‘problem play’ (Asp 1986, 48; see also McCandless 1997, 37).³ As Lynne Simpson noted, ‘Feminist studies celebrate [Helena] for actively pursuing the male love object, a gender reversal of the norms of patriarchal courtship’ (1994, 174). Helena, in these readings, provided a model of female agency; moreover, the interactions between Helena, Diana, and the Widow emblemized the power of women’s close relationships to resist male dominance. In the past decade, however, scholars have queried the reflexive assumption that Helena poses a threat to the status quo: for Jean Howard, ‘to read Helena as a protofeminist self-actualizing heroine’ is to misread Helena, whose ‘actions ... shore up patriarchal structures’ (2006, 44). Most recently, these questions have found their most provocative and exciting expression in Kathryn Schwarz’s work on Helena’s ‘constant will’ and ‘conservative motives’ (2011, 107). For Schwarz, the intensity of Helena’s ‘conservative’ pursuits ‘disables conventional distinctions between passive conformity and active impropriety’ (111), and thus, contra Howard, lays bare the fault lines of patriarchal structures.

Focusing on the central yet overlooked place service holds in *All’s Well*, this article builds on the work that feminist scholarship has done to query our assumptions about the play, examining two intertwined threads previous criticism has not adequately addressed in its quest to locate the problem of *All’s Well*: the tendency to overlook the crucial roles money and class occupy in the play, and the tendency to romanticize the relationship between Helena, the Widow Capilet, and Diana. In an essay on the homoeroticism of Shakespeare’s comedies, Julie Crawford cautions queer scholarship to remember that ‘the fear of readings that are distasteful to us ... can shut down reading practices’ (2003, 140); such a warning would seem equally

² Boas characterized *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet* as ‘Shakespeare’s problem-plays’ because ‘the issues raised [within the plays] preclude a completely satisfactory outcome’ and thus resist the generic confines of either tragedy or comedy (1900, 345).

³ For more on *All’s Well* as a problem comedy, see Kastan 1985; Gleed 2007; Rawnsley 2013.

relevant for feminist critics. Readings of *All's Well* that move to 'recuperate' Helena by praising her for pursuing her desires and for forging close female relationships miss two important features of Helena's agency: it depends on her financial standing, and it comes at the literal and figurative expense of other men and women.

As I will show, criticism of *All's Well* has turned a blind eye to the negotiations between Helena and the Florentine women, insisting on seeing the bonds between these women as ties of friendship rather than of finance. In a statement typical of these readings, David Bergeron writes of the 'new solidarity with other women' that Helena finds when she 'gets linked with the Widow of Florence and her daughter Diana, two crucial characters for determining Helena's social identity and providing her with narrative options' (2007, 111). What this reading misses is that what gives Helena 'narrative options' and 'determines her social identity' is not friends but *money*. Helena does not 'get linked with' the women – she employs them as her servants. Moreover, it is the sacks of gold and other markers that she is 'great in fortune' (3.7.14) that Helena is able to produce – presumably bestowed upon her by the King and the Countess – that give her the 'options' to travel to Florence, to buy the Widow and her family a meal, to enter into contract with them, to buy a bed-trick, to return first to the Court and then to Rousillon, to get a message to the King, to enable Diana to post bail, and, ultimately, to claim Bertram as 'doubly won' (5.3.314).⁴

To redress the critical tendency to separate women's relationships from their finances, this article examines female traffic in two of the key economies of the play, service and marriage, and the correspondent commodities, people (service) and virginity (marriage). By highlighting the economic dimensions of *All's Well*, in particular the role Helena plays as a mistress to the Widow and her daughter, Diana,⁵ I show that Helena is not a passive victim of patriarchy who finds nurturing and egalitarian sisterhood with the Florentine women. Instead, Helena is a woman keenly aware of both her own financial situation and that of those surrounding her, fluent in the market value of virginity, and masterful at getting what she wants.⁶

⁴ All references to *All's Well That Ends Well* are from Snyder 1993.

⁵ Such attention to the role of women as household managers builds on the work of Korda 2002 and Wall 2002, as well as on Frances Dolan's work on the mistress-servant relation (1994).

⁶ By focusing on these relationships, this essay adopts what Dympna Callaghan has described as 'post-revisionist feminism', which examines women's complex role as 'excluded participants' within early modern culture (2007, 6-14). I draw also on Karen Newman's discussion of the role women play in the traffic in women (1990), as well as Melissa Sanchez's recent work on the fantasy that female friendship is inherently compassionate and caring (2012).

What Helena wants, however, does not necessarily align with what feminist criticism has wanted Helena to want. As Schwarz has argued, feminist scholarship has declared Helena a ‘disorderly woman’ while failing to notice that she is disorderly precisely because of the force of her ‘conservative motives’: ‘that she seeks legitimate endorsement of a socially sanctioned bond tends to slip the mind’ (2011, 107). Schwarz’s work on Helena’s pursuit of Bertram offers a useful corrective to feminist work that has idealized Helena; I build on this critique by attending to Helena’s pursuit of relationships with other women. Examining the homosocial ‘socially sanctioned bonds’ that Helena forges and strengthens, I demonstrate that issues of economics and self-interest govern not only male-female relationships but also those between women. Such attention highlights the role that service – conceived of as economic or sexual or both – plays in driving the action of *All’s Well*. Moreover, attention to Helena’s self-interest exposes the aspects of the play that do not fit comfortably with feminist ideals of mutuality and egalitarianism, from fantasies of topping and (ab)use, to the packaging of people as commodities, to the play’s insistence that asserting individual agency comes at the expense of another individual’s or group’s agency. Helena is not, as Boas claimed, ‘a trifle *bourgeoise*’ – she is *thoroughly bourgeoise*, as are the concerns of this play.

2. *Class Fantasies*

At the heart of *All’s Well* is not only, as previous scholarship has suggested, a battle between the sexes but also an intense focus on class and money. While critics have noted the ways in which Helena’s desire for Bertram is hindered by their class disparity, in particular how unusual the play’s drastic class-crossing is in Shakespeare’s canon (Frye 1983, 48), less attention has been paid to the ways in which her desire for him is predicated upon that very difference. Helena’s first expression of her love for Bertram meditates on their social rank and the consequent impossibility of their love:

’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 archèd 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. (1.1.87-100)

As Julie Crawford has noted, this passage is not just about Helena's love for Bertram but 'also concerned with social ambition'⁷ (2011, 41): but what if, to push Crawford's point further, the 'ambition in my love' is in fact what generates that love? In her declaration, Helena repeatedly describes Bertram in positions that place him either at a remove from or 'so above' her. Inverting the gender roles associated with chivalric romance, the maiden, rather than the knight, composes the blazon (Bloom 2010, 15-16). What would normally be the subject (Bertram) becomes the object, and yet, as subject, Helena demands to be placed in the object position.

Helena's assertion that 'the hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love' takes on a new meaning if understood in this context. The syntax of the sentence seems relatively straightforward: 'the hind', a female deer, is the subject, 'that would be mated by the lion' its appositive, and 'must die for love' the main verb clause: yet the imperative and agent-less action of the sentence – 'the hind must die' – is so strong that it threatens to hide the rich perversity of the hind's desire. The hind 'would be mated' by the lion; it is not the lion that desires to mate the hind. 'Mated' here seems to carry both of its contemporary denotations: 'to render powerless; to overcome; to defeat; to kill' (*OED* v1) and also 'to marry; to take or give in marriage; to match with; to equal' (*OED* v3). The prior sense of the word is what we would expect a lion to do to a hind – namely, kill it – while the latter sense of the word is what Helena professes as her goal – 'to wed' Bertram. Although 'to mate' does not acquire its sense of 'pairing animals for breeding' (*OED* v3 - 5a, b) until the nineteenth century, the way Helena uses 'would be mated', particularly her labelling of the hind's desire as 'for love', connotes copulation as much as it does marriage. Such an interpretation is furthered by the sense that 'die' carries of sexual orgasm, *la petite mort*.

The image of the lion 'mating' the hind – overcoming and rendering her powerless, while matching and marrying her – not only suggests a sexual union but also foreshadows precisely the experience that Bertram and Helena (pretending to be Diana) will recount after their night together.⁸ As Bertram

⁷ Moreover, as Snyder notes, the additional meaning of hind as 'servant or menial' further emphasizes the 'disparity of rank on the chain of being between the valorous king of beasts and the timorous hind' (1993, 1.1.93n).

⁸ To explain the bed-trick more fully: Helena, through an arrangement with Diana and the Widow, has Diana agree to a night with Bertram. Unbeknownst to Bertram, the woman he will spend the night with will be Helena, not Diana; Bertram fails to realize the difference in the dark, believing the 'yet maiden bed' he 'conquer'd' (4.2.57) was that of the woman he wants (Diana) not the woman he was forced to wed (Helena). The bed-trick enables Helena to satisfy the terms under which Bertram said he would recognize Helena as his wife: she consummates their marriage, removes the jewel from his finger, and is thus able, when she arrives in Rousillon pregnant and bearing his ring, to claim Bertram as 'doubly won' (5.3.314).

and Diana arrange for their encounter, Diana instructs Bertram to remain lying 'but an hour' after he has 'conquered my yet-maiden bed' (4.2.57-58), and Helena, who takes Diana's place in the 'maiden bed', muses after the fact that men can 'such sweet use make of what they hate' (4.4.22). As Helena's repeated invocations of Bertram's superior status and her pairing of 'sweet' with 'use' suggest, the desire to be mated with (married to) Bertram is bound up in a desire to be mated by (overcome by) Bertram. Rather than the line being, for David McCandless, an expression of a 'passive ... "feminine" posture' (1997, 39) or, for Susan Snyder, a 'despairing withdrawal' in striking contrast to Helena's 'energetic plan to follow Bertram to Paris' and cure the King (1988, 67), the analogy speaks of a desire for a sexuality that is sado-masochistic and derives its pleasure from its capacity for annihilation.⁹

Helena, in fact, actively and continually expresses a fantasy of being topped by Bertram. She conceives of her relationship to Bertram in terms of service – which is, in fact, its basis – but inflates the nature of her obligation. A 'gentlewoman' of the Countess, 'bequeathed' (1.1.38; 1.3.101) to the Countess by Helena's father, Helena constitutes one of the many servants who make up the Countess' household. Yet, instead of seeing her service as circumscribed by bonds of domestic labor, Helena imagines what she renders as if it were a feudal duty (see Boas 1900, 350). When the Countess tells Helena, 'I am a mother to you' (1.3.137), Helena resists, insisting on the class difference between herself and Bertram:

The Count Rousillon cannot be my brother:
I am from humble, he from honoured name;
No note upon my parents, his all noble.
My master, my dear lord he is, and I
His servant live and will his vassal die. (1.3.155-159)

The most obvious reason why Helena does not want Bertram to be her brother is that she wants him as her husband; a sibling relationship posits her desired union as incest. Yet her insistence on their difference verges on the obsequious and depends on degrading her own lineage. Helena here asserts her 'humble ... name' and 'no note upon [her] parents', yet the Countess, Lafew, and even the King make much of her father's name, and Helena herself uses it to her advantage when she comes to cure the King. Indeed, so great is the note upon her father that, when the King says, 'I knew him' (2.1.100) she responds, 'The rather I will spare my praises towards him. / Knowing him is enough' (101-102). While such protestations to the Countess may read as humility, Helena's insistence that Bertram is 'my master, my dear lord' and that she

⁹ On masochism, see Bersani 1987; Sanchez 2012.

will 'his servant live and will his vassal die' bespeaks an overinvestment in a service relationship.

Crucial to Helena's formulation of her love for Bertram is her sense of his elevation above her. When she finally confesses her love to the Countess, she portrays her love for Bertram as a kind of (false) theology:

Indian-like,
Religious in mine error, I adore
The sun that looks upon his worshipper
But knows of him no more. (1.3.204-207)

Essentially reiterating her prior description of her love as 'idoltrous fancy', Helena now envisions Bertram's 'bright particular star' as the brightest of stars, 'the sun'. In whatever form Helena's analogies take, they consistently place Bertram above her: be he the sun, a star, a lion, her master, or her lord, Bertram is always on top. Moreover, in elevating their bond out of the domestic sphere and into the realm of *courtoisie*, Helena's desire for Bertram replicates the class discourse of the traditional sonnet sequence while at the same time subverting the gender norms associated with such love poetry (see Marotti 1982; Warley 2005). Where, for Petrarch, Laura – whose name puns on both *l'aura* (the air) and *la laurea* (the poet's laurels) – is both the unattainable, cold, yet dazzlingly brilliant star, and also the means for Petrarch's social elevation (since his sonnets to her bring him wealth and fame), for Helena, Bertram fulfills that role.

Helena's fantasy of loving what is above her collides with Bertram's refusal to love what is beneath him. Helena insists, even in marriage, on seeing her relationship to Bertram as one of service. When Helena turns to Bertram and asks to marry him, she frames the proposal in the language she had earlier used to describe her love: 'I dare not say I take you; but I give / Me and my service, ever whilst I live, / Into your guiding power' (2.3.103-105). Yet Helena's service is precisely what Bertram does not want.¹⁰ Bertram seizes on the domestic ties Helena alludes to, arguing such a bond makes a proposed marriage outrageous.¹¹ Keeping with the play's reliance on repetition and echo,

¹⁰ Later, when wooing Diana, Bertram will respond to Diana's charge that he 'owe[s]' his wife (Helena) 'duty' (4.2.12-13), that he was 'compelled to her, but I love thee / ... and will for ever / Do thee all rights of service' (15-17), to which Diana retorts, 'Ay, so you serve us / Till we serve you. But when you have our roses, / You barely leave the thorns to prick ourselves, / And mock us with our bareness' (17-20). Diana's charge proves true about the kind of 'service' she can expect from the Count, who will dismiss her as a 'fond and desp'rate creature' (5.3.178) and 'common gamester to the camp' (189) when she demands that he recognize her as his wife.

¹¹ On the complex and potentially threatening class positioning of servants in the early modern household, see Dolan 1994, 64-67.

Bertram's expression of the revulsion he feels towards marriage to Helena evokes Helena's earlier arguments to the Countess against seeing Bertram as her brother. Bertram suggests that marriage to Helena is unnatural because she is of his household – as his servant, she is too far beneath him in rank to be his wife, and, moreover, as his servant, she functions as an extension of his family (Weil 2005, 67).¹² Bertram protests the proposed marriage, answering the King's claim, 'Thou know'st she has raised me from my sick bed' (2.3.112), with the retort, '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' (113-115). Bertram's statement plays on the meanings of both 'breeding' and 'charge', emphasizing her inferiority to him and further suggesting that Helena is not so much a servant in his household as an animal, a complaint that echoes the bestial language Helena herself uses to theorize their class difference. Perhaps not coincidentally, 'to serve', beginning in the sixteenth century, was also used to describe the male animal's act of 'covering' a female in sex (*OED* v1.52).

But while for Helena, being 'the hind that would be mated' is thrilling, for Bertram, matching with his servant holds no appeal. Bertram's reminder that Helena was raised 'at my father's charge' works, like the Countess' repeated description of Helena as 'bequeathed' to her, to concretize service ties as commercial relationships. That Helena 'had her breeding at my father's charge' suggests not only the Count of Rousillon's command over Helena's parents but also his financial responsibility for them (*OED* charge n10a). This reality of domestic service, in which bestowing permission to marry (and thus permission to procreate) constituted the prerogative of the master or mistress, is glimpsed, comically, in Lavatch's request to the Countess to marry Isabel (a request, it should be noted, that the Countess does not grant – and that Lavatch eventually withdraws). Yet while Bertram's rejection of Helena may seem distasteful, it is not inaccurate – from a legal standpoint, as maid to and possibly ward of the Countess, Helena is essentially a commodity of the Rousillon household.¹³ Bertram, however, is also a servant: as the King's ward and vassal, he is powerless to refuse the King's command that he marry Helena. Helena and Bertram's marriage highlights the limits of seeing female agency as a proxy for gender parity, for Helena's agency comes at the expense of Bertram's, as it will later come at the expense of Diana's. The irony of their marriage is that, in promising to raise Helena up to Bertram's status, the King creates a situation that neither Helena nor Bertram wants: she does not want to be raised, and he does not want to be brought down.

¹² For more on parity in marriage on and off the early modern stage, see Giese 2006, 49-80.

¹³ This is also why she must secure permission from the Countess before she can go to the court. For a discussion of wardship as it pertains to both Bertram and Helena, see Reilly 2007.

3. *Helena's Household*

Refusing to consummate his marriage to Helena, Bertram deserts both his bride and King to fight the war in Florence; Helena, under the guise of pilgrimage,¹⁴ follows him to Florence, where she enlists two of the women she meets, a widow and her daughter, in a plot to win Bertram. Money is the key element to the relationship between Helena and the Florentine women, yet readings of this relationship have essentially disavowed its economic basis. Crawford sees the women as Helena's 'homosocial coterie' (2003, 153), while McCandless describes Helena's stay in Florence as a 'kind of secular nunnery', where Helena 'join[s] a confederacy of women who assist her' (1997, 49). Asp avers that Helena finds in Diana and the Widow 'the loyalty, support, and kindness of women' (1986, 59) and repeatedly characterizes their relationship as 'bonding' (55, 56, 59). Likewise, Snyder has written that 'what Helena walks into, and quickly joins, is a ... self-confirming friendship ... Solidarity strengthens Helena; it empowers Diana' (1988, 77); Bergeron, too, invokes the 'new solidarity with other women' that Helena finds in Florence (2007, 177). Such formulations conflate bonds of economic service with sisterhood and fail to do justice to the complex class negotiations between the women. Closer attention, however, to the interactions between Helena, the Widow and Diana suggests that the truisms of cultural feminism do not account for what we witness. If anything, as Schwarz's argument on *All's Well* would suggest, female characters can be just as invested in the systems of power as male characters are and may work hard to perpetuate patriarchal structures because, in fact, these structures work for them.

Like Helena, the Widow's actions are driven by social ambition. When the Widow first appears, she is in the company of her daughter, Diana, and their neighbor, Mariana, clamoring for a view of the marching troops. While Mariana cautions Diana to 'beware of them' (3.5.18), the Widow and Diana's admiration of the men, which fixates on Bertram's nobility, suggests just how *aware* the women are of the financial gain they stand to earn from Bertram's suit. The Widow later tells Helena that Bertram serenades Diana nightly and that, despite their best efforts, 'it nothing steads us / To chide him from our eaves; for he persists / As if his life lay on't' (3.7.41-43), but here we find Diana and the Widow 'persist[ing]' in their effort to spy the Count. The Widow urges Diana and Mariana to 'come' lest they 'lose all the sight' of the troops, only to lament 'we have lost our labor' when she realizes the men have 'gone a contrary way' (3.5.1-9). As the women 'labor' to see the soldiers, the Widow and Diana speak admiringly of Bertram; indeed, Diana's first words are in praise of Bertram: 'They say the French count has done most

¹⁴ For whether or not Helena's pilgrimage is genuine, see Maxwell 1969.

honorable service' (3-4), and her mother responds with reports of his military prowess. Only Mariana voices skepticism about Bertram, warning Diana to 'take heed of this French earl. The honor of a maid is her name, and no legacy is so rich as honesty' (11-13). In this quip, we perhaps glimpse why the Widow seems less determined to deter her daughter than Mariana does. The emphasis on Bertram's nobility – he is 'the French count', the 'French earl', he has 'done most honorable service' – and Mariana's invocation of the 'rich' 'legacy' Diana stands to lose also hints at the rich legacy Diana could claim from a liaison with the Count, whether as his wife or mistress. Perhaps for this reason the Widow vacillates between encouraging and discouraging Diana's interest in Bertram.

The potential boon Bertram's attentions present for the Capilet household is first and foremost on the Widow's mind, as she shrewdly calculates how to leverage Bertram's lust for her financial gain. Upon learning that her newest lodger, Helena, 'know[s] the [Count's] lady' (3.5.55), the Widow informs Helena of Bertram's interest in her daughter: 'this young maid might do her [the Count's wife] / A shrewd turn, if she pleased' (56-57). The Widow not only suggests that it is entirely up to Diana whether to sleep with the Count but also that Diana's actions would not affect Diana, her mother, or the Count, so much as they would the Count's wife. The Widow's understanding of the impact of Diana's actions on the Count's wife suggests that the Widow envisions a kind of female economy of exchange. This female economy works in multiple ways: the bed-trick plot relies on collaboration between women, and it is predicated upon an exchangeability of women that benefits women as well as men. Not all women, however, benefit equally from this exchange, for while the Widow here suggests that Diana may do as she 'please[s]', the Widow and Helena are in fact the agents of the transaction, and Diana their object. Finally, the Widow's formulation of the 'shrewd turn' her daughter could do to the Count's wife ironically anticipates the 'shrewd turn' that Diana will do for the Count's wife (Helena) and, of course, the 'shrewd turn' that Diana and Helena will do the Count. Together, these points add up to a plan that will enable the Widow, through cooperation with Helena and manipulation of Diana, to move closer to her former 'well born' estate (3.7.4).

What may come as a surprise is that, for the Widow, moving up the social ladder actually entails entering the service economy. An independent household manager (and possibly owner), the Widow abandons being the head of her own household in Florence for the opportunity afforded her and her daughter to become a part of the household headed by Helena. By forsaking the position of mistress of her own home for servant in the Count of Rousillon's household, the Widow makes a trade-off that stands to bring her and her daughter significant social and economic capital. In so doing, the Widow's transition from independence to dependence challenges the traditional *telos* about service, marriage, and financial security. While scholars have written about the flexible nature of the service economy in the Renaissance, they tend to focus on how

periods of service provided young men and women with the skills and capital needed to establish their own households (Goldberg 1992, 158-202; Burnett 1997, 129-132; Schalkwyk 2008, 20-22). The typical trajectory for service – what young men and women do before marriage – suggests that marriage is the end goal, and that service provides the means and money to achieve it. This plot is played out over again and again in comedy: the reward for dutiful service is marriage and independence.¹⁵ What the Widow's turn from merchant to servant suggests, however, is that the goal is not necessarily marriage or independence but rather financial security. Her actions add to the wealth of evidence found both in the historical record and in drama that attests to the tremendous weight women placed and were imagined to place upon financial considerations as they evaluated life decisions – whether for marriage, work, or interpersonal relationships.

Helena and the Widow immediately forge a bond, albeit united not in 'an instant friendship' (Weil 2005, 65) but in mutually beneficial self-interest. In what we might understand as the first instantiation of Helena as the Widow's mistress, Helena seizes on the information the Widow offers about Bertram's designs on her daughter and bids her hostess to invite Diana and Mariana to dine with them, not only pledging to pay for their meal but also suggesting that further remunerations are in store. Helena promises the Widow: 'to requite you further, / I will bestow some precepts of this virgin / Worthy the note' (3.5.95-97). From the start, Helena frames the service Diana and the Widow will perform in terms of financial gain, suggesting that the 'precepts' or orders Helena will give Diana provide additional recompense. By addressing the Widow in the second person, while referring to Diana as 'this virgin', Helena creates a distinction between the two outcomes of her actions: the 'virgin' gets the precepts, but the Widow reaps the rewards. Furthermore, Helena's language deploys social class in a way that highlights the difference between the women. The basic premise of her thought – that she should 'requite [the Widow] further' – positions Helena as the overly courteous benefactress and the Widow as her magnanimous host, when in fact the only 'requital' Helena owes the Widow is a fee for lodging. Such a rhetorical move is not unlike what Helena does with Bertram and the service she owes him, rhetorically transforming economic and domestic bonds with the language of courtesy and chivalry. The oddity of Helena's offering to the Widow is highlighted by the dissonance produced by her use of the formal 'you' rather than 'thee' to address a subordinate; Helena's word choice underscores the newness and strangeness of Helena's social position, as if she were unaccustomed to the language she can now speak

¹⁵ At least, we could say this about city comedy. For comedies that focus on the households of the nobility, the servants who marry remain within the household (for example, Nerissa and Gratiano in *The Merchant of Venice* or even Maria and Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*).

of mastery – or, perhaps, Helena deliberately deploys language to flatter the Widow. Most importantly, Helena's offer of overcompensation for the service the Widow renders as Helena's hostess puts the Widow in a kind of debt to Helena, which the Widow and Diana can (and will) repay upon receiving the 'precepts' Helena 'bestow[s]'.¹

The connotation of 'precept' seems out of keeping with what Helena will tell the Widow and Diana, but it is notable that Helena describes what she will relay as 'precepts'. 'Precept' means not only a 'command' but often carries a religious connotation, such as a divine injunction or an order for moral conduct. Helena is careful to set up the illicit activity she plots in terms that present Diana's proposed conduct with Bertram as in keeping with the Ten Commandments, themselves often referred to as the 'ten precepts' (*OED* n1a). In addition to its religious connotation, a 'precept' also has forensic and fiscal applications: a 'precept' may describe a written legal order, issued by a legal authority (e.g. judge, monarch, sheriff); a written legal order for a payment; 'a document granting possession of something or conferring a privilege'; or 'a written letter of credit or similar document authorizing a payment to be made from funds' (*OED* n4a, b, c). In a sense, obeying the 'precepts' (as in command) that Helena 'bestows' upon Diana generates another 'precept' – the warrant for 'payment to be made from [Helena's] funds'. Helena's use of the verb 'bestow' further distances her from the Widow and Diana by implying that the 'precepts' she tells them of are in fact gifts. Of course, as Marcel Mauss (1966) has theorized, a gift is never just a gift and, in fact, demands the receiver 'recompense' she who bestows. This layered meaning of 'bestow some precepts' offers a microcosm of the complex negotiations between Helena, the Widow Capilet, and Diana, in that underlying what is presented as simply moral and friendly is, in fact, a shrewd economic transaction.

When we next see Helena and the Widow, Helena is in the midst of 'bestow[ing] some precepts', but noticeably absent from the dialogue is the 'virgin', Diana. Instead, Helena explains to the Widow how Diana can help her – and how, in turn, she can help them. The discussion between the two women, from the start of the scene, is a kind of coded financial negotiation; it is not, as Snyder writes, a scene of 'conference and mutual assurance among the women to remind us how important their solidarity is' (1988, 77). In response to the goods Helena produces and the story she has told, the Widow exclaims:

Though my estate be fall'n, I was well born,
 Nothing acquainted with these businesses,
 And would not put my reputation now
 In any staining act. (3.7.4-7)

The Widow takes pains to contrast her former 'well born' position with her current 'fallen' 'estate', while emphasizing that even in this diminished status,

she is not only above but also 'nothing acquainted with these businesses'. While 'these businesses' lacks a clear antecedent, the Widow draws a clear connection between Helena's proposal and 'staining act[s]', suggesting that the 'businesses' of Helena's proposal are tantamount to pandering. In this scene, the Widow highlights the impact Diana's actions will have not on Diana but on herself. This stands in direct contrast to the Widow's initial discussion of Bertram and her daughter. Earlier, the Widow relates that Diana might sleep with Bertram 'if she [Diana] pleased' (3.5.68), implying that the decision to have sex with Bertram was Diana's and Diana's alone. Furthermore, when the Widow earlier discussed Bertram's 'suit', she noted that it might 'corrupt the tender honor of a maid', but assured Helena that Diana 'keeps her guard' (3.5.71-73). In this initial discussion of her daughter and Bertram, the Widow lays both the responsibility and impact on her daughter: it is Diana's 'pleas[ure]', 'honor', and 'guard' that are at stake. But when propositioned by Helena, the Widow emphasizes the impact of her daughter's actions on herself: professing herself 'nothing acquainted with these businesses', she declares, 'I ... would not put *my* reputation now / In any staining act' (3.7.5-7; emphasis added).

But what if reputation means something different for the Widow than it does for her daughter? Yes, women's chastity was seen as inextricably linked with their reputation, but that does not mean that the Widow's 'reputation' is as bound up in '[un]stained' sexuality as is Diana's 'honor'. The word 'businesses' points to what may actually be at stake for the Widow if her 'reputation' is 'stained': her business. The Widow's livelihood depends on her lodgers and, given the reputation that inns and hostels had for being *de facto* brothels, it starts to seem that the 'reputation' the Widow does not want 'stained' is that of her 'businesses', not her body.¹⁶

The Widow elicits Helena's assurance that the Widow will not 'err in bestowing' the 'good aid that I of you shall borrow' (3.7.11-12), but Helena's words are not enough: the Widow requires more concrete (and non-returnable) collateral – money – and carefully calibrates her words and actions to maximize the payment she will receive. The Widow moves the conversation towards what kind of 'good aid' she will receive in return by reminding Helena of her wealth: 'I should believe you', the Widow demurs, 'For you have show'd me that which well approves / You're great in fortune' (12-14). The calculated hesitancy of the Widow's 'should believe' ups the ante, forcing Helena to show her hand and hand over the money:

Take this purse of gold,
And let me buy your friendly help thus far,

¹⁶ For the vulnerable nature of women's words, bodies, and the inextricable link to perceived chastity, see Stallybrass 1986; Gowing 1996.

Which I will over-pay and pay again
When I have found it. (3.7.14-17)

Helena abandons her earlier abstract verb of 'bestowal' and switches to the language of commerce, but the 'friendly help' is not purely 'friendly,' it is bought. Furthermore, Helena not only asks to 'buy' the Widow's cooperation but also promises that, in return for that help, Helena will 'over-pay and pay again'. After Helena explains what Diana is to do, still the Widow does not consent – instead, she simply acknowledges that she understands Helena: 'Now I see the bottom of your purpose' (28-29). Crucially, the Widow's reply not only continues to withhold consent but also emphasizes the nefariousness of Helena's plot. By stating that only 'now' can she 'see the bottom', the Widow stresses the dark, murky nature of Helena's 'purpose', reinvigorating the Widow's earlier charge of the jeopardy posed to her 'reputation' by 'these businesses' and 'any staining act'. Again, Helena assures the Widow, explaining that her plan is 'lawful' (30) and that Diana will be 'most chastely absent' (34) at the appointed 'encounter' (32). Words carry less weight with the Widow, however, for Helena only secures the Widow's cooperation by promising to deliver more money upon completion of the plan: 'to marry her, I'll add three thousand crown / To what is passed already' (35-36). Not until this point does the Widow actually acquiesce: 'I have yielded' (36).

What the Widow has 'yielded' and Helena 'buy[s]' is, in fact, Diana – who, it should be noted, is entirely absent from the scene. For a 'purse of gold', 'three thousand crowns' and the further promise of more 'over-pay[ment]', the Widow rents her daughter out to Helena for the evening. Notwithstanding the money that physically changes hands in this scene ('take this purse of gold'), critics, by reading Helena's relationship with the Widow and Diana as one of friendship and camaraderie, rather than of service and commerce, have overlooked what the play stages before our eyes. So persistent is this resistance that even when critics acknowledge the financial dimension to the women's relationship, they fail to follow the money. In the introduction to the Oxford edition of *All's Well*, Snyder notes that the Widow's help is secured with a 'large bribe' (1993, 6), but, when reading 3.7, she nonetheless romanticizes the bond between the two women. In a final push to convince the Widow, Helena exclaims:

You see it lawful then, then: it is no more
But that your daughter, ere she seems as won,
Desires this ring; appoints him an encounter;
In fine, delivers me to fill the time,
Herself most chastely absent. After,
To marry her I'll add three thousand crowns
To what is passed already. (3.7.30-36; emphasis added)

Snyder points out, in her notes to the text, that the line in which Helena describes where exactly Diana will *not* be during the bed-trick ('Herself most chaste absent. After'), is metrically 'somewhat short' – one beat short of pentameter. Snyder posits that if the shortness is 'intentional, the pause would naturally occur after *absent*, as Helena passes over the actual *encounter* in agitated silence' (1993, 3.7.34n, emphasis in original). But what if the pause after 'absent' is not, as Snyder speculates, Helena's 'agitated silence' at the thought of the 'actual encounter' but Helena's pause as she waits for the Widow to agree to her plan? When the Widow does not immediately acquiesce, Helena then resorts again to 'buy[ing] ... friendly help', and promises the additional 'three thousand crowns'.

This money, in theory, goes not to the Widow but to furnish Diana with an ample dowry, but Diana's desires are never mentioned, and it is taken for granted by the Widow, Helena, and the King that Diana's greatest reward will be her own marriage. Diana, however, is far less keen to marry than those around her seem to notice. After Diana and Bertram arrange their 'encounter' and he leaves, Diana declares her intent to remain a virgin: 'Marry that will, I live and die a maid' (4.2.74). Her distaste for marriage goes unacknowledged by the other characters: in the exchange economy of the play, the only way to requite Diana is to marry her. Helena later assures the Widow:

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. (4.4.18-21)

The implication is that, without Helena, Diana would have no dowry; with Helena as 'helper', Diana will have the means to marry up and thereby recoup the losses of the Widow's 'fallen' estate. The 'nobly born' Widow may be able to 'nobly' marry Diana, creating a better life for both mother and daughter. What further complicates Helena and the Widow's plan to marry off Diana is that both women have experienced a change in fortune due to marriage. Helena, from 'humble ... name' (1.3.156), aided by the 'honor and wealth' (2.3.145) bestowed upon her by the King, marries a Count. The Widow, 'nobly born' yet reduced to renting rooms in her home to lodgers, seems to owe her 'fallen' estate to her condition of widowhood.¹⁷ Helena thus aims to recreate for Diana, in miniature scale, what the King has done for her.

¹⁷ For widowhood as a time of economic difficulty, see Brodsky 1986; Erickson 1993, 200-203.

4. *Diana's Service*

What Helena notably fails to recognize, however, is that Diana expresses no desire to marry, preferring to emulate her namesake. Indeed, the only desire for her future that Diana expresses is to remain with Helena. When Helena informs Diana that she must still 'suffer / Something in my behalf' (4.5.27-28), Diana responds:

Let death and honesty
Go with your impositions, I am yours
Upon your will to suffer. (4.4.28-30)

Diana's pledge to Helena and bestowal of herself – 'I am yours' – evokes the language Helena earlier used with Bertram. When choosing Bertram as her husband, Helena avers, 'I dare not say I take you, but I give / Me and my service, ever whilst I live / Into your guiding power' (2.3.103-105). Helena's pledge of 'service', with its pun on both domestic duty and sexual pleasure, finds a parallel in Diana's assertion that she is 'upon [Helena's] will to suffer', and, furthermore, echoes Helena's description of her position to her husband; Helena tells Parolles: 'In everything I wait upon his [Bertram's] will' (2.4.55).

In Diana's declaration, we also see a parallel grammar to Helena's fantasies of submission and self-abnegation. The most straightforward reading of the line, 'upon your will to suffer' suggests that Diana will do whatever Helena 'will[s]' or desires; a second, darker reading of the line foreshadows how Diana will suffer because of Helena's 'will'.¹⁸ Both meanings work together to infuse Diana's vow 'to suffer' with the masochistic energy that we see in Helena's fantasy of 'the hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love'. The similarity between the representations of Diana's desire for Helena and Helena's desire for Bertram demonstrates that relationships between women are not necessarily more egalitarian than those between men and women. Moreover, in presenting us with an erotics in which subject position, rather than object gender, defines desire, *All's Well* offers a counter-narrative to assumptions around heterosexuality and female desire, suggesting both the possibilities for and limits of female autonomy in fantasies of submission.

While scholars have turned to Helena and the Florentine women to locate egalitarianism in a play preoccupied by if not predicated upon difference, the female homosocial relations of *All's Well* do not seem to offer what critics have projected onto them. If what scholars seek is egalitarianism in relationships

¹⁸ The contemporary pun on 'will' and genitals further imbues Diana's declaration with a sexual charge. Shakespeare's 'sonnet 135' has inspired much discussion of the sexual meanings of 'will': see, for example, Fineman 1986, 242-296; see also Schwarz 2011 for readings of 'will'.

typically bound by uneven power dynamics, then they have been looking at the wrong gender, for if *All's Well* offers this potential, it is in Bertram and Parolles' early relationship.¹⁹ Whereas Helena longs, in all senses of the verb, to serve Bertram, Parolles refuses to see his relationship to Bertram as one of service, vehemently objecting to Lafew's repeated description of Bertram as Parolles' 'lord and master' (2.3.187, 243).²⁰ Instead, Parolles and Bertram speak a language of companionship and affection, marked by invocations of 'sweetness' and possessive articles.²¹ Immediately after Lafew informs Parolles of Bertram's marriage, Bertram enters, and Parolles greets him twice with the appellation 'sweet heart' (2.3.270, 272). For his part, Bertram calls Parolles 'my Parolles' (273) and bids him to 'go with me to my chamber, and advise me' (295). That Parolles turns out to be, in the words of Jean Howard, a 'bad friend' (2006, 55) has, perhaps, stopped us from hearing a discourse not unlike that which Laurie Shannon describes in her work on early modern friendship (2002). More to the point, the way Parolles and Bertram conceive of their relationship and the way service is imagined in a male homosocial context highlights what we do not see in Helena's relationship with Diana and the Widow. In particular, what is missing is the reciprocal nature of the affection: Diana is never once, for Helena, 'my Diana', nor does Diana provide counsel to her mistress.

What Diana provides is utility to Helena, whose interest in Diana, despite the desires of feminist critics, goes no deeper than self-interest. While Helena never rejects Diana's pledge, 'I am yours', Helena's response to Diana does not, in fact, respond to Diana's testament. Instead, Helena hurries them along, promising, 'All's well that ends well' (4.4.35). Helena appears no more concerned with Diana's actual desires than the other characters of *All's Well* are: Diana functions as an object trafficked to cement alliances, accrue capital, and demonstrate power – be it for Helena, the Widow, Bertram or the King. Contra Alexander Leggatt, who characterizes Helena's relationship with the Capilets as a restorative alternative to the harsh, patriarchal world of court, proclaiming, 'Helena, after being argued over by men, surrounds herself by women' (2003, 40), Helena belies any dichotomy between the rules that

¹⁹ Indeed, scholars often do not conceive of Parolles as Bertram's social inferior. See, for example, Howard, who describes Parolles as Bertram's 'friend' (2006, 55) and Michael Friedman, who describes Parolles as Bertram's 'mentor' (1995a 81); for more on Bertram and Parolles, see also Friedman 1995b.

²⁰ Parolles' resistance to the title of Bertram as his 'master' is part of an extended debate Lafew and Parolles have on Parolles' subordination to Bertram: Lafew insists that Parolles is the 'count's [Bertram's] man' (2.3.195) and Parolles protests his independence. The irony is that Parolles will end the play in Lafew's service, as Lafew instructs the deflated braggart, 'Wait on me home, I'll make sport with thee' (5.3.322-323).

²¹ See Masten 2004 on the rhetoric of sweetness spoken between men.

govern men and those that govern women. Indeed, Helena's deft negotiation of her world aligns her behavior more closely with the way scholars, notably Arthur Marotti (1982), Christopher Warley (2005), and Stephen Greenblatt (2005), have described early modern men operating in pursuit of political power and personal gain than her behavior conforms to the tenets of cultural feminism. As the interaction between Helena and the Florentine women almost immediately reveals, investment in patriarchal systems of power, particularly systems of class and wealth, cross gender lines. Like the courtiers Marotti, Warley, and Greenblatt variously describe, Helena demonstrates a profoundly economic and instrumental view of personal relations, carefully calculating the value of those surrounding her to maximize her own personal worth.

If Diana's desire really is to remain with Helena, then all does not end well for Diana, for no less than the King pledges to marry her off (conditional, of course, on her being a virgin). While Crawford has argued that the dowry Helena bestows upon Diana enables Diana to refuse the King's offer to endow her and to choose, instead, to remain with Helena (2011, 44-45), Crawford presumes an agency that Diana never has. Nothing in the play indicates that Diana will be able to refuse the King's marriage offer or that Helena will intervene on Diana's behalf (unless it is in Helena's interest).

Indeed, the reason no precedent exists to suggest that Diana will get her wish is that, in *All's Well*, consent to marry depends not on the will of the bride and groom but rather on that of their master or mistress. Of the four marriages proposed or enacted over the course of the play (Bertram and Helena; Lavatch and Isabel; Bertram and Maudlin; Diana and a French lord), not one of them takes place without the consent of the master or mistress of the bride and groom. The desires of the marrying couple are ancillary to those of their social superior: the King forces Bertram to marry Helena; the Countess defers Lavatch's suit to Isabel; and Lafew pushes the marriage between Bertram and his daughter, Maudlin, which first requires approval of the King. In *All's Well*, marriage is a top-down affair, a manifestation of the power that people have over one another.

5. *The Marriage Market*

Helena is acutely aware of the market value of virginity, and it is integral to her plans that both she and Diana are virgins. Helena points to her virginity as why the King should trust her and allow her to cure him, offering up her 'maiden's name' (2.1.170) as collateral; later, when presented before the young lords of France, she attests, 'I am a simple maid, and therein wealthiest / That I protest I simply am a maid' (2.3.67-68). As a physician's daughter who lacks the money and title required to match her with a member of the nobility, Helena locates her 'wealth' in her intact hymen. Her formulation is on point,

as the King later echoes Helena's emphasis on the value of her virginity. The King promises Bertram that he will create a 'counterpoise' (2.3.176) in Helena's estate, bestowing title and wealth upon her: 'if thou canst like this creature as a maid, / I can create the rest' (143-144). What the King cannot 'create' is Helena's maidenhead, and yet Helena's protest that being a 'simple maid' makes her 'wealthiest' is not quite true: being a virgin does not make her wealthy but, rather, allows her to be made wealthy.

At the play's end, Diana finds herself in a similar situation: the King pledges to Diana that, 'if thou be'st yet a fresh uncroppèd flower ... I'll pay thy dower' (5.3.327-328), but Diana's marriageability is not the only thing dependent on her virginity. Diana's entire utility to Helena is predicated upon being like the 'titled goddess' (4.2.2) with whom Diana shares a name.²² The first time Helena refers to Diana in conversation with the Widow, Helena calls her 'this virgin' (3.6.96), reducing Diana to her maidenhead and echoing Helena's earlier description of herself to the King as 'simply a maid' (2.3.68). As perhaps Helena already anticipates, Diana's virginity proves critical to getting Bertram to comply with the plot. When the Widow finally 'yield[s]' to Helena's plan, she tells Helena to 'instruct my daughter how she shall persevere' (3.7.40-41); presumably part of what Helena 'instruct[s]' Diana to do is to emphasize her maidenhead when negotiating with Bertram. By leveraging her virginity against Bertram's lust, Diana secures Bertram's ring, arguing, 'Mine honor's such a ring, / My chastity's the jewel of our house' (4.2.45-46). Confronted with this, Bertram capitulates, handing Diana the ring, performing exactly as Helena had earlier predicted he would when she tells the Widow that, 'in his idle fire, / To buy his will', Bertram will dispense with the family heirloom (3.7.26-27). Helena orchestrates their encounter so that Bertram believes he barter[s] his 'ring' for Diana's 'ring', with the classic pun on ring as vagina, when in fact he exchanges his ring for Helena's two rings – both the ring she wears on her finger, bestowed upon her by the King, and her maidenhead.²³

The reward – marriage – that Diana receives for 'keep[ing] a wife herself' and herself 'a maid' (5.3.330) suggests the obsessive and odd relationship that the play has with virginity, simultaneously the most important thing a woman can possess but must also dispense (Jankowski 2003). Helena, before she has fully formulated her plan to cure the King and win Bertram, asks Parolles, 'How might one do, sir, to lose it [virginity] to her liking?' (1.1.152-153). Parolles dodges the question: 'Tis a commodity will lose the gloss with lying; the longer kept, the less worth. Off with't while 'tis vendible' (1.1.155-156). This is the resounding sentiment of the play. Virginity is a 'commodity'

²² Parker 1992 writes on the punning of Helena's and Diana's names.

²³ On the erotics of the exchanged rings, see Ray 2007.

with a clear expiration date: as the King warns, a woman must be not merely an ‘uncroppèd flower’ but a ‘fresh’ one at that (5.3.327). Parolles’ injunction ‘off with’t while ’tis vendible’ not only highlights the good fortune Diana and Helena have to be virgins at the right place and time but also suggests Helena’s near inability to lose her virginity ‘to her liking’ and Diana’s seemingly certain failure to *keep* hers ‘to her liking’.

What makes virginity such a complex commodity is that, unlike the play’s other trafficked goods, virginity only bears its initial exchange value: it cannot be circulated. The relatively low value of female bodies that can be circulated (versus virgin bodies) is highlighted by Diana’s initial treatment at the French court. Dismissed by Bertram as a ‘common gamester to the camp’ (5.3.214), Diana immediately objects to the charge and offers proof against it:

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. (5.3.189-195)

Diana must rely on external proof, provided by the ring, to demonstrate that she is not a ‘commoner o’ th’ camp’. The qualities she identifies in the object – its ‘high respect’, ‘rich validity’ and uniqueness – are antithetical to ‘common[ness]’ and to how Bertram describes her. Diana reasons that she cannot be a prostitute because, if so, he would have ‘bought me at a common price’, yet the value of the ring far outweighs the cost of a ‘commoner’, *ergo* she cannot be a prostitute. Bertram has an easy rebuttal that uses Diana’s invocations of economics against her. Acknowledging their dalliance, Bertram explains:

Her inf’nite cunning and modern grace
Subdued me to her rate. She got the ring,
And I had that which any inferior might
At market price have bought. (5.3.216-219)

Bertram points to the logical fallacy in Diana’s argument: she has assumed he is a rational actor in the market and thus whatever price he paid for her must reflect her true value. As Bertram clarifies, he simply overpaid. Indeed, Bertram formulates Diana’s financial savvy as further proof of her profession, able to use both her ‘infinite cunning and modern grace’ to ‘subdue [him] to her rate’. The juxtaposition of ‘infinite cunning’ and ‘modern grace’ adds a subtle insult to Diana, with ‘modern’ suggesting Diana’s ‘grace’ is characterized by ‘employing the most up-to-date ideas and techniques’ (*OED*

adj3a) and also 'everyday, ordinary, commonplace' (*OED* adj4): her 'cunning' is 'infinite' as she employs her *au courant* tactics to sell something – herself – for a far higher 'rate' than its ordinariness should command. As Bertram is quick to note, 'any inferior might / At market price have bought' Diana: the only crime Bertram is guilty of is that of being a bad bargainer.

There is no way for Diana to argue against Bertram, for all her answers lend credence to his accusations of her as 'common': socially inferior, publicly available, and cheap. Her inability to counter Bertram convincingly is not, however, just about the weight women's words have against men's, for class distinctions are critically important in this climactic scene. The charges leveled against Diana are as much about her social position as they are about her chastity. Bertram defends himself against Diana's statement that he promised to marry her by pointing out their class differences: 'Let your highness / Lay a more noble thought upon mine honor / Than for to think that I would sink it here' (5.3.179-181). Bertram emphasizes their disparity by noting the 'noble[ness]' of his 'honor' in contrast to Diana's, whom he describes first as a 'fond and desperate creature' (178) he merely 'laugh'd with' (179). Furthermore, by calling her a 'creature' and equating relations with her (be it sex or marriage) to 'sink[ing] it here', Bertram emphasizes Diana's low status, degrading her to a nearly sub-human level and evoking his earlier description of Helena's 'breeding at my father's charge'.

Diana's counter-arguments continue to get her into more trouble, and here, again, we see how critical class is. Frustrated by Diana's confusing answers to the King's questions, Lafew pronounces her a kind of verbal 'common gamester': 'This woman's an easy glove, my lord; she goes off and on at pleasure' (277-278). The King, unable to determine whether Diana or Bertram is telling the truth, threatens them with punishment: 'to prison with her, and away with him' (282). But whereas Bertram is merely taken 'away' (he was earlier sent 'away' in the scene only to be called back momentarily – evidently 'away' is not necessarily that far), Diana is not only sent 'to prison' but also will be executed 'within this hour' unless she explains how she obtained the ring (284). When Diana refuses to explain the ring's origins, the King repeats his charge, 'Take her away' (285), to which Diana replies, 'I'll put in bail' (285); however, an offer of money only serves to highlight her low social status. The King responds to her pledge by joining in calling her a prostitute: 'I think thee now some common customer' (286), as if the ability to participate in a cash economy were proof that a woman earned the money by sex. The irony of the statement is that Diana has, in fact, been bought and sold by the men and women around her, but she is no 'customer' in these transactions – she is what is being consumed.²⁴

²⁴ While the phrase 'common customer' is slang for 'prostitute' (*OED* 4b), 'customer' could also mean 'one who frequents any place of sale for the sake of purchasing' (*OED* 3a),

The state of being a virgin allows the virgin's body to be transformed into value: it is what enables the King to make Helena wealthy and to marry off Helena and Diana. It is also what transforms the virgin's words into value: scholars are quick to note the link between the potency of Helena's cure and her virginity.²⁵ Moreover, the credibility of Diana's accusations against Bertram is dependent on her perceived chastity. In contrast to all the money and bodies that circulate through service, pilgrimage, travel, marriage, war, and politics, virginity, unlike the glove to which Lafew likens Diana, cannot 'go off and on': once 'off', it is no longer 'vendible'.

6. *All's Not Well*

At the play's end, Helena's savvy marketing of not just her own but also Diana's 'commodity' of virginity 'while 'tis vendible' gets Helena what she wants – namely, to be both 'name and thing' of wife to Bertram – but it does not get Diana what she wants. What Diana seems to want is to remain Helena's servant and a virgin, neither of which she will be if she marries a French nobleman. Paying attention to both Helena's and Diana's desires invites us to examine Asp's formulation that, 'singular among the plays of Shakespeare's canon, *All's Well That Ends Well* is written out of the history of the female subject, and this history is the history of her desire' (1986, 48). I find this formulation productive: as the women of *All's Well* suggest, the 'history of the female subject and ... her desire' requires a female *object*, and therein lies the true 'problem' of the play. By focusing on the complex class and status relationships amongst the women, we can see how Helena, the Widow, and Diana are variously imagined to not only resist but also participate in, benefit from, and perpetuate patriarchal structures of marriage and the household. What makes the ending of *All's Well* not 'end well' is not simply Helena's (re)union with Bertram but also the way the play exposes the willingness of women to traffic in women – and in themselves.

Ultimately, this analysis challenges us to reconsider the problem of this play, suggesting that *All's Well* is a 'problem play' not because, to quote Asp, 'the frog prince remains a frog and the princess chooses to overlook his slimy skin' (1986, 48), but because of its refusal to romanticize the negotiations not only of heterosexual coupling, but also of female friendship and service. This is a play in which people are commodities, transferable objects that can be traded, 'bequeathed', and purchased 'at market price'. And yet the problem

a title which effectively describes both Helena and Bertram in the Capilet lodge, where they each 'purchase' Diana's services for the night.

²⁵ For the link between Helena's virginity and her curative powers, see Simpson 1994, 173; Howard 2006, 48; Floyd-Wilson 2013; Wall 2013.

is not, as Kastan suggests, that 'what should be freely given must be bought' (1985, 585), but rather that what should be bought is given and what should not be for sale is a prized commodity. As such, *All's Well That Ends Well* defies our expectations of comedy, insisting on laying bare the female-authored transactions it takes to get the conjugal couple to wed and to bed.

Works Cited

- Asp Carolyn (1986), 'Subjectivity, Desire and Female Friendship in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *Literature and Psychology* 32, 48-63.
- Bergeron D.M. (2007), "'The credit of your father': Absent Fathers in *All's Well, That Ends Well*", in G. Waller, ed., *All's Well, That Ends Well: New Critical Essays*, New York-London, Routledge, 169-183.
- Bersani Leo (1987), 'Is the Rectum a Grave', *October* 43, 197-222.
- Bloom Harold, ed. (2010), *All's Well That Ends Well*, Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages Series, New York, Chelsea House Publishers.
- Boas F.S. (1900 [1896]), *Shakespeare and His Predecessors*, New York, Scribner and Sons.
- Brodsky Vivien (1986), 'Widows in Late Elizabethan London: Remarriage, Economic Opportunity and Family Orientations', in L. Bonfield, R. Smith and K. Wrightson, eds, *The World We Have Gained*, Oxford, Basil Blackwood, 122-154.
- Burnett M.T. (1997), *Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture: Authority and Obedience*, Basingstoke, Macmillan; New York, St. Martin's Press.
- Callaghan Dymrna (2007), 'Introduction', in D. Callaghan, ed., *The Impact of Feminism in Renaissance Studies*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1-15.
- Coleridge S.T. (1907 [1849]), *Coleridge's Lectures on Shakespeare and Other Poets and Dramatists*, ed. by Ernest Rhys, London, J.M. Dent & Co.
- Crawford Julie (2003), 'The Homoerotics of Shakespeare's Elizabethan Comedies', in J. Howard and R. Dutton, eds, *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume 3: The Comedies*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 137-158.
- Crawford Julie (2011), '*All's Well That Ends Well*: Or, Is Marriage Always Already Heterosexual?', in M. Menon, ed., *Shakespeare: A Queer Companion to the Works of William Shakespeare*, Durham, Duke University Press, 39-47.
- Dolan F.E. (1994), *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Erickson Amy (1993), *Women and Property in Early Modern England*, New York, Routledge.
- Fineman Joel (1986), *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press.
- Floyd-Wilson Mary (2013), *Occult Knowledge, Science and Gender in the Shakespearean Stage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Friedman M.D. (1995a), 'Male Bonds and Marriage in *All's Well* and *Much Ado*', *SEL* 35, 2, 231-249.
- Friedman M.D. (1995b), "'Service is no Heritage": Bertram and the Ideology of Procreation', *Studies in Philology* 92, 40-51.
- Frye Northrop (1983), *The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections on Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*, Toronto, The University of Toronto Press.

- Giese Loreen (2006), *Courtships, Marriage, Customs and Shakespeare's Comedies*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gleed Paul (2007), 'Tying the (K)not: The Marriage of Tragedy and Comedy in *All's Well, That Ends Well*', in G. Waller, ed., *All's Well, That Ends Well: New Critical Essays*, New York-London, Routledge, 85-97.
- Goldberg P.J. (1992), *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Gowing Laura (1996), *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Greenblatt Stephen (2005 [1980]), *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- Howard Jean (2006), 'Female Agency in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Modern Language and Literature* 106, 43-62.
- Jankowski Theodora (2003), 'Hymeneal Blood, Interchangeable Women, and the Early Modern Marriage Economy in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*', in R. Dutton and J. Howard, eds, *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume III: The Poems, Problem Plays, Late Plays*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 89-128.
- Kastan D.S. (1985), '*All's Well That Ends Well* and the Limits of Comedy', *ELH* 52, 575-589.
- Korda Natasha (2002), *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Leggatt Alexander (2003), 'Introduction', in *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. by Russell Fraser, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Lennox Charlotte (1753), *Shakespear illustrated: or, the novels and histories, on which the plays of Shakespear are founded, collected and translated from the original authors. By the author of The female Quixote*, vol. I, London, 3 vols.
- Lounsbury Thomas (1908), *Shakespeare as Dramatic Artist*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Marotti Arthur (1982), '"Love is not Love": Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order', *ELH* 49, 2, 396-428.
- Masten Jeffrey (2004), 'Toward a Queer Address: The Taste of Letters and Early Modern Male Friendship', *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, 3, 367-384.
- Mauss Marcel (1966 [1954]), *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. by I. Cunninson, London, Cohen & West.
- Maxwell J.C. (1969), 'Helena's Pilgrimage', *The Review of English Studies* 20, 189-192.
- McCandless David (1997), *Gender and Performance in Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Newman Karen (1990), 'Directing Traffic: Subjects, Objects, and the Politics of Exchange', *differences* 2, 2, 41-54.
- Parker Patricia (1992), '*All's Well That Ends Well*: Increase and Multiply', in D. Quint, M. Ferguson, G.W. Pigman, and W. Rebhorn, eds, *Creative Imitation: New Essays on Renaissance Literature in Honor of Thomas M. Greene*, Binghamton, SUNY Press, 355-390.
- Rawnsley Ciara (2013), 'Behind the Happily-Ever-After: Shakespeare's Use of Fairy Tales and *All's Well That Ends Well*', *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 2, 149-154, <www.fupress.com/bsfm-jems> (2/2015).

- Ray Nicholas (2007), "'Twas mine, 'twas Helen's": Rings of Desire in *All's Well, That Ends Well*, in G. Waller, ed., *All's Well, That Ends Well: New Critical Essays*, New York-London, Routledge, 183-193.
- Reilly Terry (2007), '*All's Well, That Ends Well* and the 1604 Controversy Concerning the Court of Wards and Liveries', in G.F. Waller, ed., *All's Well, That Ends Well: New Critical Essays*, New York-London, Routledge, 208-220.
- Sanchez Melissa (2012), "'Use Me But as Your Spaniel": Feminism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Sexualities', *PMLA* 127, 3, 493-511.
- Schalkwyk David (2008), *Shakespeare, Love and Service*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Schwarz Kathryn (2011), *What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Shakespeare William (1993), *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. by S. Snyder, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Shannon Laurie (2002), *Sovereign Amity: Figures of Friendship in Shakespearean Contexts*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- Simpson Lynne (1994), 'The Failure to Mourn in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *Shakespeare Studies* 22, 172-188.
- Snyder Susan (1988), '*All's Well that Ends Well* and Shakespeare's Two Helens: Text and Subtext, Subject and Object', *English Literary Renaissance* 18, 1, 66-77.
- Snyder Susan, ed. (1993), 'Introduction', in *All's Well That Ends Well*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Stallybrass Peter (1986), 'Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed', in M. Ferguson, M. Quilligan, and N. Vickers, eds, *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 123-142.
- Wall Wendy (2002), *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Wall Wendy (2013), 'Recipes for Thought: *All's Well That Ends Well* and Early Modern Knowledge-Practices', Medieval-Renaissance Seminar: Phyllis Rackin Lecture, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, delivered 27 February 2013.
- Warley Christopher (2005), *Sonnet Sequences and Social Distinction in Renaissance England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Weil Judith (2005), *Service and Dependency in Shakespeare's Plays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson Edwin, ed. (1961), *Shaw on Shakespeare: An Anthology of Bernard Shaw's Writings On the Plays and Poems of Shakespeare*, New York, E.P. Dutton & Co.