THE WORKS

All's Well that Ends Well

Key Facts

Date: 1604–5
Length: 3,075 lines
Verse: 55% / Prose: 45%

Major characters' share of lines:	
Helena	16%
Parolles	13%
King	13%
Countess	10%
Bertram	9%

Unsettling romantic comedy which poses the question, is all well that ends well?

Plot and characters

Helena (or Helen), daughter of a recently deceased physician, is in love with **Bertram**, Count of Roussillon, whose father has also just died, making him a ward of the **King of France**. While his mother, the **Countess**, is sympathetic to her affections, Bertram is not. Bertram attends the King at court, accompanied by the Countess's friend **Lafew**. In exchanges with the clown, **Lavatch**, the Countess comments on the unfolding plot at a distance. The King has been suffering from a terminal illness that baffles all of his doctors. Helena, armed with her father's prescriptions, persuades him to try her remedy, on condition that she be given the husband of her choice if she is successful. On his recovery, the King agrees to her request to marry Bertram. Bertram himself is horrified by the prospect of marrying so ignobly, but is forced, unwillingly, to accede. He immediately leaves Helena to go off to war with his braggart companion **Parolles**. Bertram's letter to her refuses to recognise the marriage until she has the ring from his finger and a child of his body. Helena is undeterred. Under cover of going to Santiago de Compostela on pilgrimage, she follows Bertram and learns that he is attempting to seduce **Diana**. She arranges with the **Widow**, Diana's mother, that, unbeknownst to Bertram, she will herself substitute for Diana in a bed trick, and Diana arranges the

assignation with the ardent Bertram. Meanwhile, Parolles' cowardice is revealed when he is tricked by the **Lords of Dumaine** and other soldiers, speaking a comic nonsense language, into believing he has been captured by the enemy. It is announced that Helena is dead and Lafew and the Countess plan for Bertram to marry Lafew's daughter. Lafew agrees to employ the disgraced Parolles as a fool. Bertram returns and agrees to the new marriage, producing an engagement ring which the King recognises as one he gave to Helena. Bertram cannot explain how he got this ring, and is arrested on suspicion of killing Helena. A letter arrives from Diana claiming that Bertram had seduced her on the promise of marrying her on Helena's death, and the Widow and Diana arrive at court to confront him. Eventually Helena is brought in to explain, and Bertram has to accept that, since she has got his ring and says she is pregnant with his child, he must acknowledge her as his wife.

Context and composition

The play shares linguistic patterns, particularly vocabulary, with *Othello*, *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, and was probably written around 1604–5. Along with *Measure* and *Troilus* (and, more rarely, *Hamlet*) it is often identified as a so-called 'problem play', and it shares its sexualised plot culminating in a bed trick with *Measure*, its cynicism about war and male camaraderie with *Troilus*, and its defiantly anti-heroic presentation of its characters with both plays. There have also been suggestions of a later composition date of 1607–8, which would place the play between the romantic comedies and the late plays (*Pericles*, *Tempest*, *Winter's Tale*) with which it also shares some of its fairy-tale plot elements. It was first printed in the First Folio of 1623. Shakespeare's source for the play is a story from the Italian collection of novellas, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* – via a sixteenth-century English translation. His major additions to the source are the comic roles: the clown Lavatch and Parolles, who has something of Falstaff's boastfulness (see *Henry IV* parts 1 and 2).

One notable – and audible – feature of *All's Well* is its frequent use of rhyme – as in Helena's interview with the King in Act 2 – alongside

other formal moments such as her letter in the form of a sonnet. This artificiality contrasts effectively with the cynicism of the play-world and its characters, as its attempts at make-believe idealisation – the King's miraculous cure, the winning of a mate through cleverness – are repeatedly undercut by the seedy realities of human motivation.

Performances

We have no details of any early performances – and indeed, there are confusions in the Folio text which have led some scholars to propose it was not actually performed in the early modern period. The play was little revived over the intervening centuries, although the trick played on Parolles was popular during the eighteenth century At the beginning of the twentieth century George Bernard Shaw identified it as a play which had found its time alongside the dark, unflinching work of Ibsen, but it has struggled to establish itself in the repertoire. Subsequent revivals followed Shaw in stressing the play's uncomfortable modernity, often through contemporary dress, such as Barry Jackson's 1927 production with a young Olivier as Parolles. More recently the play has achieved stage success where its combination of artificiality and realism has been acknowledged. Trevor Nunn's 1981 Edwardian production, for example, with Peggy Ashcroft as the Countess, Harriet Walter as Helena and Mike Gwilym as Bertram was praised by one newspaper reviewer for keeping 'the balance between comic hoopla and emotional pain' by 'putting real, suffering people into an unreal situation'. Marianne Elliott's National Theatre production of 2009 stressed the play as fairy tale with a set out of an illustrated

Grimm, complete with ramparts, wolves and magic lanterns and an indeterminate ending with Helena and Bertram caught momentarily in a freeze-frame wedding photograph. The play has not been directed for cinema, but the BBC Shakespeare included a version directed by Elijah Moshinsky (1981), set entirely indoors with elaborate lighting effects and effective performances from Angela Down, Ian Charleson and Celia Johnson as the Countess.

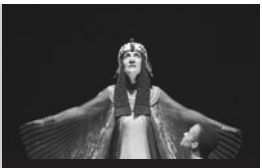
Themes and interpretation

In showing us an interrupted courtship between young people, overlooked by their elders, *All's Well* bears a superficial resemblance to the romantic comedies which precede it in Shakespeare's writing career. But these formal similarities are often seen to be outweighed by tonal discrepancy: that marriage is so ruthlessly divided here into betrothal, consummation and only reluctant acknowledgement perverts the comic plot. Sex, money, disease and casually ignoble warfare undermine that cheerful disposition we like to associate with the genre of comedy. Much criticism of *All's Well* has tended to boil down to an assessment of its central couple. Is Helena Shakespeare's 'loveliest character' (Coleridge) or 'a keen and unswerving huntress of man' (E. K. Chambers)? Is Bertram, as Dr Johnson felt, a 'coward' and 'profligate', or is he to be pitied for Helena's implacable and unsolicited pursuit? Certainly, Shakespeare has here developed the vigorous comic heroine who actively seeks her own romantic fulfilment – Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* – into an often discomforting character who defies expectations from her first soliloquy, revealing that she is not mourning her father but swooning after Bertram. Bantering with Parolles about the value of virginity, cool and unsentimental in making the arrangements with the Widow, Helena does not admit of the vulnerability or insecurity that might make her more likeable. Her credo of self-sufficiency – 'Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, / Which we ascribe to heaven' (1.1.187–8) – echoes the radical agency of an Iago (in *Othello*) or Edmund (*King Lear*): and these are not happy role models for a comic heroine.

But nor does Bertram garner audience sympathy: at best he is callow, like *Much Ado*'s Claudio; at worst he is deeply selfish, incapable of empathy, resistant to that impulse towards the re-education of young men that is at the heart of much Shakespearean comedy. If *All's Well* complements *The Taming of the Shrew*, this time offering a pattern of male subjection to female will, its ending is no less problematic than that of the earlier play (the plays are printed consecutively in the First Folio). Bertram's final acceptance of his role as husband begins with a conditional 'If', just as the last iteration of the play's title in its closing lines introduces a note of contingency: 'All yet seems well, and if it end so meet, / The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet' (5.3.322–3). The qualifications deny us a 'happy ever after' resolution to the play's unsettling narrative.

Shakespeare takes a fairy tale here and systematically darkens it. Helena's magical healing of the King partakes of a fantasy world, but it is a miracle she exploits for her own agenda, just as her pilgrimage has distinctly earthly aims. Lafew's remark – 'they say miracles are past, and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless' (2.3.1–3) – is typical of the play's knowingness as it deploys an idealised folkloric structure in the shrewd service of human selfishness and need. 'All's well that ends well' seems less the conclusion of a fable and more the amorality of the Renaissance pragmatist Machiavelli, advocating ruthless self-interest at the heart of power politics. 'The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together' (4.3.60–1) could seem to stand as an epigraph for the play's own tragi-comic structure, but in context – the Dumaine Lords discussing Helena's 'death' – it, too, is ironised. Helena, like Hero in *Much Ado* before her, and Hermione later in *The Winter's Tale*, returns from this 'death' – the conclusion of a tragedy – and instead claims her comedic marriage promise. But the atmosphere of loss and mourning is never fully dispelled in this bracingly uncomic play.

Antony and Cleopatra



Key Facts
Date: 1606
Length: 3,636 lines
Verse: 95% / Prose: 5%

Major characters' share of lines:	
Antony	24%
Cleopatra	19%
Octavius	12%
Enobarbus	10%

Epic, cinematic love tragedy between charismatic central protagonists embodying a geopolitical conflict between two great empires

Plot and characters

The Roman general **Mark Antony** is in love with the Egyptian empress **Cleopatra**, and prefers her company in Alexandria to his political and domestic responsibilities in Rome, much to the disapproval of **Octavius Caesar**, his fellow triumvir (joint ruler). **Enobarbus**, a blunt and loyal soldier, recognises the hold that Cleopatra has on his master. On news of the death of his wife Fulvia, and of trouble with a political rival, **Pompey**, Antony returns to Rome. There he agrees to marry Caesar's sister **Octavia**, in an attempt to renew their political alliance, although a **Soothsayer** warns him to stay away from Caesar. Cleopatra expresses her jealousy when a messenger delivers this unwelcome news. Antony and Caesar agree a peace with Pompey and drink together, but the amity does not last: Antony hears that Caesar has attacked Pompey and deposed the third, weaker triumvir **Lepidus**. He returns to Egypt, sending his wife as an envoy to Caesar. Caesar responds to Antony's departure, and to the news that he and Cleopatra have declared themselves monarchs in Egypt, by declaring war. During the sea battle at Actium, the Egyptian fleet is defeated when Antony leaves the fight to follow Cleopatra's ship. He is wracked with despair at his actions, but is victorious in a second battle. On the eve of the third battle, his soldiers are fearful, and Enobarbus deserts. The Egyptian fleet surrenders to Caesar. At

Antony's fury, Cleopatra retreats to her monument and sends her eunuch **Mardian** to tell Antony she has committed suicide. Antony asks his servant **Eros** to kill him, but Eros kills himself and Antony botches his own suicide. He is taken to Cleopatra's monument to die in her arms. **Dolabella**, one of Caesar's followers, warns Cleopatra that she is to be sent away; with her attendants **Iras** and **Charmian**, Cleopatra prepares for her own death. A darkly comic **Clown** (the title suggests a rustic person, rather than a comedian) brings her a basket of figs with hidden snakes. Dressed in her royal robes, Cleopatra allows the asp to bite her breast: Iras and Charmian die too. Caesar announces that the lovers shall be buried together.

Context and composition

In writing the play, around 1606 (first published in 1623), Shakespeare made extensive use of Sir Thomas North's translation of the ancient Greek biographer Plutarch – *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579) – a book he had already drawn on for the writing of *Julius Caesar*, which introduces Antony and Octavius Caesar, and one he would use again for *Coriolanus*. In some parts of the play – as, for example, Enobarbus' lyrical speech of Cleopatra on her barge – Shakespeare is obviously working directly from the open copy of Plutarch; but elsewhere he introduces new elements including the choric figure of Enobarbus himself and a stronger focus on Cleopatra as equal protagonist (Plutarch's biographies are all of male figures). The play is among Shakespeare's longest, at over 3,500 lines.

It is possible to read *Antony and Cleopatra* as a middle-aged version of the earlier story of tragic youth, *Romeo and Juliet*: in both plays, as in the cynical intervening play named for lovers, *Troilus and Cressida*, the central relationship can never be properly private since it is pressurised by, and in some sense epitomises, the struggle between warring families or rival empires. Like Macbeth, Othello and Coriolanus, Antony is a soldier who does not accommodate himself fully to domesticity; like Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* or Margaret of Anjou in the *King Henry VI* plays, Cleopatra represents an exotic, feminised, external threat. As in the other Roman plays, Rome itself and its definitions are being fought over.

Performances

Shakespeare's great dramaturgical innovation in *Antony and Cleopatra* is the use of short, crosscut scenes to represent the escalating emotional and military conflict, particularly in Act 4 (sixteen scenes). But the epic scope of the drama has been difficult to realise in the theatre, and the stage direction '*they heave Antony aloft to Cleopatra*' registers something of the physical difficulty of raising the fatally wounded hero into Cleopatra's monument (presumably originally represented by the balcony over the stage). After its initial performances in 1606–7, there were none until Garrick's lavishly rearranged version in the mid eighteenth century, and subsequent productions found the scenery required to make this spectacular play palatable to contemporary audiences prohibitively expensive. In the twentieth century the roll call of actors for the two main roles attests to the power of the writing for performers: Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier (1951), Janet Suzman and Richard Johnson (1972, filmed for television), Helen Mirren and Michael Gambon (1981), and Judi Dench and Anthony Hopkins (1987) – although in most productions reviewers tend to find one of the protagonists more convincing than the other. Recent productions have tended to use design to stylise the differences