

INTRODUCTION

Sources and traditions

Shakespeare's principal source for *All's Well That Ends Well* was the story of Giletta of Narbon, the ninth tale of the third day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Though he may have consulted the French version by Antoine le Maçon, Shakespeare is most likely to have used the English version in William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1595).¹ Giletta is the daughter of a physician who belongs to the household of the Count of Rossillion. She spends her childhood in the company of the Count's son Beltramo, and falls in love with him 'more than was meet for a maiden of her age' (p. 389). When on his father's death Beltramo goes to Paris, Giletta is determined to follow him, but being 'rich and fatherless' (p. 389) and surrounded by kinsfolk who keep foisting prospective husbands on her, she is at first at a loss about how to get away. Learning that the King of France has 'a swelling upon his breast, which by reason of ill cure was grown to be a fistula' (p. 390), she takes this as an excuse to visit Paris, with a herbal cure devised by her father. The King, after some initial scepticism, decides 'This woman peradventure is sent unto me of God' (p. 390), and puts himself in her hands. The price she specifies is a husband of her own choosing, and having cured the King she names Beltramo. Beltramo, 'knowing her not to be of a stock convenable to his nobility' (p. 391), refuses her. The King will not break his promise to Giletta, and insists on the marriage, 'for the maiden is fair and wise, and loveth you most entirely' (p. 391). Beltramo goes through the ceremony, but instead of consummating the marriage runs off to join the Florentine army at war in Tuscany. Giletta returns to Rossillion, where she wins the love of the Count's subjects by her effective management of his estate, which had fallen into disorder.

Beltramo sends a message declaring that he refuses to live with Giletta unless she can get a ring, which he guards carefully 'for a certain virtue that he knew it had' (p. 392), off his finger, and produce a son of his begetting. Giletta takes this as a challenge, and having 'assembled the noblest and chiefest of her country' (p. 392) announces she is going on a pilgrimage. Instead she journeys to Florence, where she finds that Beltramo, who enjoys the reputation of 'a courteous knight, and well beloved in the city' (p. 393), is paying court to a young impoverished gentlewoman. She tells her story to the gentlewoman's mother, and arranges that the gentlewoman will demand the ring as an assurance of Beltramo's love; on receiving it she will agree to go to bed with him. Giletta gets the ring, and takes the gentlewoman's place in bed. On

¹ On le Maçon, see Howard C. Cole, *The All's Well Story from Boccaccio to Shakespeare*, 1981, pp. 86–7. Painter's version is conveniently reprinted in Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* 2, 1968. Quotations from Painter are from Bullough, modernized.

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the first encounter she conceives twin boys. Several other encounters follow, and once she is sure she is pregnant Giletta rewards the gentlewoman with a dowry of five hundred pounds, five times what her mother asked for. After she has given birth, she confronts the Count at a great feast, falling weeping at his feet and declaring, 'I am thy poor unfortunate wife' (p. 396). She then presents the ring and the twins, proving she has fulfilled his conditions. Yielding to pressure from his subjects and the ladies of his court, Beltramo accepts her, 'to the great pleasure and contentation of those that were there, and of all his other friends', and 'from that time forth he loved and honoured her as his dear spouse and wife' (p. 396).

Boccaccio's tale is one of problem-solving, of challenges overcome by determination and ingenuity. So is Shakespeare's. But while Boccaccio's characters have the basic feelings required to motivate the story, and no more, Shakespeare's are more rounded and complex, and elicit a less straightforward response. To the class pride of Beltramo Shakespeare adds in Bertram a realistic callowness and immaturity. While in Boccaccio's denouement Beltramo, who is giving the feast that forms its setting, has one thing to do – hear his wife's story and graciously accept its conclusion – Bertram, more culprit than authority figure in the last scene, is trapped, squirming, in a series of lies and evasions before the appearance of Helena rescues him. His final acceptance of her is hedged about with 'if' clauses, and Boccaccio's happy-ever-after ending is replaced by the King's cautious 'All yet seems well' (5.3.322). Giletta is a public figure, rich and well connected, a conspicuous success as a manager of her absent husband's estate. Helena is poor, withdrawn, a loner with a quality of hiddenness. The sympathy she draws is not from a large community, but from individuals who meet her one on one – the Countess, Lafew (both characters are Shakespeare's inventions) and the King. Once Giletta is married the narrator calls her the Countess; we seldom think of Helena that way. It is characteristic of Helena's hidden quality that while Giletta produces twin boys Helena's child at the end of the play is still unborn. And while Giletta follows a straight narrative line to the fulfilment of her purpose, encountering only one major bump on the road (Beltramo's refusal), Helena, while following the same line, has more local setbacks to overcome, and feelings that are more tentative and conflicted. Shakespeare compresses the bed-trick, reducing the several encounters to one, which produces only one child. Elsewhere he expands: Parolles is added as Bertram's companion (and, some characters claim, his misleader) and develops a story of his own. Boccaccio's background of nameless subjects and kinsfolk becomes a talkative supporting cast that fills out the social worlds of Rossillion, Paris and Florence. A brisk, straightforward story with minimal characterization has become a rich, complex and difficult play.

While Boccaccio was Shakespeare's principal source, there are other influences and traditions at work. The bed-trick has a long ancestry, appearing in the Bible in Genesis 29, where Jacob thinks he is marrying Rachel and finds her father has substituted her sister Leah. The Amphitryon story, told and re-told through the centuries, concerns a wife who thinks she is sleeping with her husband when she is actually sleeping with Jupiter. In Menander's *Epileptontes* and Terence's *Hecyra* women are impregnated in

anonymous encounters with men who will eventually be their husbands. MarliSS C. Desens has counted forty-four plays of Shakespeare's time that use versions of the bed-trick.¹ The device is both a convenient story-telling formula, a way to create a problem and a way to solve it, and a haunting myth that touches on the impersonality of sex and the uncertainty built into the closest of relationships. In using this device Shakespeare is not just borrowing from Boccaccio but tapping into a long tradition.

Russell Fraser has suggested that in the background of the play are some historical characters, including Christine de Pisan (1385?–1430), a 'resourceful feminist' who learned philosophy, language and sciences from her father, a physician and astrologer who tried unsuccessfully to cure the French king Charles V of a fistula. He also sees a 'train of associations' with the ninth-century Burgundian count Girart of Rossillion, who bears Bertram's title, and whose proper name is close to that of Helena's father. In the epic that bears his name, Girart defies Charlemagne, who has chosen a wife for him. Repenting, he builds a church to house the relics of Mary Magdalen, who died at Marseilles (one of the play's settings), a church that later became a starting point for the pilgrimage Helena claims to be taking to Santiago de Compostella.² Susan Snyder finds a source for the dialogue on virginity between Helena and Parolles in Erasmus's colloquy '*Proci et puellae*', where two speakers debate the relative merits of marriage and virginity.³

Parolles himself, like the bed-trick, has a long ancestry. The figure of the braggart soldier runs through the comedy of Greece and Rome, well into the Renaissance and beyond. The most famous classical example is Pyrgopolynices, the title character of the *Miles Gloriosus* of Plautus, itself based on a Greek original, *Alazon* (*The Braggart*). In Plautus, the plot against the title character hinges not on his military boasts but on his vanity about his success with women. His come-uppance is a beating and the threat of castration; he ends the play drawing a moral about the punishment of lechery. The stock pattern of ridiculous boasting ending in humiliation is clear enough in Parolles; but if Shakespeare is thinking of Plautus in particular, he has deflected the theme of the embarrassing consequences of lechery onto Bertram. Earlier English examples of the braggart soldier include the title character of Nicholas Udall's *Roister Doister*, Sir Topas in John Lyly's *Endymion*, and Bobadill in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour*. Shakespeare never uses the type without giving it a twist. Ancient Pistol is perhaps his most straightforward braggart, but even he has an extra dimension: spouting quotations from old plays, he is a walking metatheatrical joke, not just embodying a familiar theatrical type but poking fun at the whole idea of theatrical tradition. The braggart soldier is one ingredient, but only one, in the rich compound that makes up

¹ MarliSS C. Desens, *The Bed-Trick in English Renaissance Drama: Explorations in Gender, Sexuality and Power*, 1994, p. 11. Zvi Jagendorf traces the bed-trick from Genesis to Molière in 'Strangers in the Night: Sexual Encounters in Religious and Secular Texts', *UTQ* 53 (1983–4), 135–48. On Menander and Terence, see Robert S. Miola, 'New Comedy in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *RQ* 46 (1993), 23–43 (pp. 35–7). Miola notes that Boccaccio copied out the whole of Terence by hand (p. 24).

² Introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition, 1985, pp. 5–6.

³ World's Classics edition, 1993, pp. 6–8, 233–9.

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Sir John Falstaff. Don Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost* starts as a conventional braggart, but by the end of the play he has acquired, as Parolles will do, a surprising dignity.

Closer to Shakespeare's immediate theatrical context is a range of plays, mostly comedies, that appeared around the turn of the century, featuring abusive prodigal husbands and long-suffering, forgiving wives. Three characteristic examples, all anonymous, are *The Fair Maid of Bristow*, *How a Man May Choose a Good Wife From a Bad* and *The London Prodigal*.¹ In *Fair Maid* and *How a Man May Choose* the husbands are drawn away from their wives by courtesans; in *The London Prodigal* Flowerdale, deserting his wife, tells her 'Why, turn whore, that's a good trade, / And so perhaps I'll see thee now and then' (3.3.295–6). (Something like this literally happens to Bertram, when he tries to commit fornication and ends up consummating his marriage instead; the programme note for the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre's 2000 production was titled 'The Man Who Committed Adultery with his Own Wife'.) The deserted wives all show a Griselda-like patience and self-abnegation, a manner Helena adopts in the disastrous early days of her marriage. But Helena is never quite so abject as Mistress Arthur in *How a Man May Choose*:

Or if you think me unworthy of the name
 Of your chaste wife, I will become your maid,
 Your slave, your servant, any thing you will,
 If for that name of servant, and of slave,
 You will but smile upon me now and then. (B1v–B2r)

The loving concern Helena sends after Bertram when he goes to war finds an equivalent in Annabel in *The Fair Maid of Bristow* when her husband goes off with a prostitute: 'wheresoe'er thou art, / God send thee never a less loving heart' (C2v); and Helena's tendency to blame herself is like Annabel's 'Call him not wretch, he is wretched but by me' (C3v). In criticism and frequently in production Bertram's youth is made the excuse for his behaviour. He simply needs to grow up. Annabel takes a similar line: 'Tis incident for young men to offend, / And wives must stay their leisures to amend' (F2r). In this vein it is hard to match Dorothea, the Griselda heroine of Robert Greene's *James IV*, who does not seem particularly offended when her husband tries to have her murdered: 'Youth hath misled: tut, but a little fault'.²

Arthur in *How a Man May Choose* tells his wife how she can please him: 'die suddenly, / And I'll become a lusty widower' (B2r). He hurries the process along with what he thinks is poison; it is the usual harmless sleeping drug, just enough to send Mistress Arthur, like Helena, into an apparent death from which she miraculously recovers. In the end all three husbands are as abject in their repentance as their wives are in patience. Flowerdale is typical:

¹ For a fuller discussion see Robert Y. Turner, 'Dramatic Conventions in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *PMLA* 75 (1960), 497–502. References are to the original editions of *The Fair Maid of Bristow* (1605) and *How A Man May Choose a Good Wife From a Bad* (1602), and the text of *The London Prodigal* in C. F. Tucker Brooke (ed.) *The Shakespeare Apocrypha*, 1908. Quotations are modernized.

² J. A. Lavin (ed.), New Mermaid edition, 1967, 5.6.10.

wonder among wives!
 Thy chastity and virtue hath infused
 Another soul in me, red with defame,
 For in my blushing cheeks is seen my shame. (5.1.320–3)

The relationship of these plays to Shakespeare's is a matter not so much of source or influence as of a stockpile of popular conventions that the anonymous writers used one way and Shakespeare used another. The runaway, finally repentant husband and the patient, forgiving wife are Helena and Bertram in outline, but only in outline. Helena takes too much initiative to be a simple Griselda, and her moments of self-rebuke are only moments. Shakespeare had already shown a simple, total repentance on the part of an erring male in Proteus in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and he seems determined not to do that again. Bertram's use of the word 'if' in the final scene adds a note of caution, an acknowledgment that turning one's life around is not so easy as conventional plays make it look. As he does with Boccaccio, Shakespeare takes a story that in other hands aims at straightforward satisfaction, and complicates it. If he is engaged with his fellow dramatists, that engagement is adversarial.

The Shakespearean context (and the date)

Any account of Shakespeare's sources needs to include Shakespeare himself. I have already suggested that his variation on the *miles gloriosus* tradition with Parolles owes something to Armado. In the matter of names *All's Well That Ends Well* is an echo chamber for the rest of the Shakespeare canon. Many of the echoes are incidental, others less so. One of the Florentine soldiers on parade in 3.5 is Escalus (the prince in *Romeo and Juliet* and the more agreeable deputy in *Measure for Measure*). In the scene of Parolles' interrogation one of the hitherto nameless French Lords picks up the name Dumaine from *Love's Labour's Lost*, and Parolles lists among the generals one Corambus (the Polonius of the First Quarto *Hamlet*). Polonius has a servant called Rinaldo; so does the Countess. Diana, the Florentine girl Bertram is trying to seduce, is a Capilet. The woman who advises her to beware of men – and this echo seems more pointed – is Mariana. Sometimes pregnant in production and therefore speaking from experience, she bears the name of the woman who replaces Isabella in the bed-trick of *Measure for Measure*. It seems even less coincidental that the Helena of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is riddled with self-doubt, and spends the early scenes of the play pursuing a man who does not want her.

All's Well shares with *Twelfth Night* a sense of the incipient exhaustion of comedy. Olivia warns Feste that his fooling grows old and people dislike it; Lavatch finds that a routine he thought was reliable has let him down: 'I ne'er had worse luck in my life in my "O Lord, sir!" I see things may serve long, but not serve ever' (2.2.45–46). Parolles, blindfolded and set upon by a crowd of soldiers speaking gibberish, may recall Malvolio shut in darkness and enduring a nonsensical conversation with Sir Topas the curate. In both cases Shakespeare is tapping a vein of comedy, the cruel practical joke, that is more characteristic of Ben Jonson. Even the



¹ 'Occasion on her wheel' (see 5.1.14, 5.3.39). From Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems* (Leyden, 1586), Sig. z3r, p. 181

battered Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is invited to rejoin the community and laugh over a country fire. Malvolio and Parolles, like Jonson's comic victims, are left alone with their humiliation, Malvolio by his own choice and Parolles by his tormentors. *Twelfth Night* is if anything darker, since Malvolio's resilience takes the form of vengeful anger, and the idea that the joke has gone too far is explicit in the play, while Parolles' resilience comes from wry self-knowledge, and for the joke against him to cross the line into excessive cruelty is more a production choice than a requirement of the text.

All's Well shares the bed-trick device with *Measure for Measure*, and critics infer the order of composition according to which play seems to them to present the more refined treatment.¹ It shares a sceptical view of war (and a character called Helen) with

¹ Fraser, pp. 4–5, sees *All's Well* as a more refined and sceptical treatment of the device, suggesting Shakespeare is taking a second look at it. G. K. Hunter, in the Arden edition, 1959, takes the plays in the other order, seeing 'a slight development and clarification' of the motif in *Measure* (p. xxiv).

Troilus and Cressida. Rosalind in *As You Like It* has, like Helena, lost a father at the beginning of the play, though while Helena's father is dead Rosalind's is in exile and recoverable. Both women find themselves turning to new male interests. Helena says of her father:

What was he like?
 I have forgot him. My imagination
 Carries no favour in't but Bertram's. (1.1.69–71)

This seems a hard-edged version of Rosalind's 'what talk we of fathers, when there is such a man as Orlando?' (3.4.38–9). Cressida joins the group when her father arranges a prisoner exchange that will take her from Troy and Troilus, and she declares, 'I have forgot my father' (4.2.96).

Among the plays, *All's Well*'s most interesting affinities are with *Hamlet*. Its unusual opening stage direction, which has four characters entering '*all in black*', recalls the conspicuous black of the mourning Prince, and through the opening minutes the note of loss is struck over and over. Helena and Bertram have lost their fathers, and the Countess is about to lose her son when he goes to Paris as ward of the King. The King himself, we learn, is virtually on his deathbed, and in 1.2 the sight of Bertram sends him into a nostalgic lament for Bertram's father, whom he idealizes as Hamlet idealizes his own lost father, saying, in effect, we shall not look upon his like again. Back in the first scene, Helena shows affinities with Hamlet. When the Countess warns her against excessive sorrow lest it be thought affected, she replies, 'I do affect a sorrow indeed, but I have it too' (1.1.42). Hamlet too distinguishes between his outer shows of mourning and 'that within which passes show' (1.2.85) – the difference being that while his outer and inner mourning are directed to the same object, his father, Helena appears to be mourning for her father but her real, inner grief is the imminent loss of Bertram. Lafew advises her, almost in the tones of Claudius, 'Moderate lamentation is the right of the dead; excessive grief the enemy to the living' (1.1.43–4). The movement of the play can be seen as an attempt to shake off grief and get on with life, though it is the first sign of a certain callowness in Bertram that he seems tactlessly eager to do just that. He interrupts the dialogue with Helena, as though impatient with the attention the Countess and Lafew are showing her (why does she matter?), telling his mother, 'Madam, I desire your holy wishes' (1.1.47). He gets in return prudent advice that might have come from Polonius to Laertes:

Love all, trust a few,
 Do wrong to none. Be able for thine enemy
 Rather in power than use, and keep thy friend
 Under thine own life's key. Be checked for silence,
 But never taxed for speech. (1.1.52–6)

Evidently this is the sort of thing a young man on his way to Paris needs to hear. As the play goes on the *Hamlet* echoes fade, as though the play itself, like its younger characters, is shaking off a memory.

All's Well, then, picks up echoes from other plays; but its most pervasive and

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fascinating affinities are with Shakespeare's Sonnets.¹ Helena in her self-abnegation is at times very like the speaker of the Sonnets in his relation to the young man: 'To leave poor me thou hast the strength of laws. / Since why to love I can allege no cause' (49.13–14); 'Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing' (87.1). She seems at one point prepared to get out of Bertram's life by pretending to die: 'After my death, dear love, forget me quite' (72.3). Helena has forgotten her father, and the speaker in Sonnet 112 declares, 'You are so strongly in my purpose bred / That all the world besides methinks are dead' (13–14). When Bertram goes to court Helena regrets 'That wishing well had not a body in't / Which might be felt' (1.1.156–7). In the young man's absence the speaker of Sonnet 44 declares, 'If the dull substance of my flesh were thought, / Injurious distance should not stop my way' (1–2). The speaker of Sonnet 61, like Helena, feels abandoned: 'For thee watch I, whilst thou dost wake elsewhere; / From me far off, with others all too near' (13–14). Bertram is, other characters agree, all too near Parolles: 'Ah, wherefore should he with infection live, / And with his presence grace impiety' (67.1–2). Parolles himself, not knowing Bertram is listening, calls him 'a foolish idle boy, but for all that very ruttish' (4.3.178–9); Parolles is 'That tongue that tells the story of thy days / (Making lascivious comment on thy sport)' (95.5–6). If anything excuses Bertram it is his youth: 'Some say thy fault is youth, some wantonness, / Some say thy grace is youth and gentle sport' (96.1–2). But as his behaviour deteriorates towards the end of the play, we wonder if anything, including youth and good looks, can excuse him: 'For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds; / Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds' (94.13–14).

Bertram, who would rather go to war in male company than to bed with Helena, recalls the frigid Adonis of *Venus and Adonis*, who would rather hunt the boar with his friends than make love to Venus. He has an aristocratic position to keep up, and a noble father to live up to. He conspicuously fails to do the latter, but through the bed-trick Helena at least sees to it that the line will not die out: 'You had a father, let your son say so' (13.14). Class difference sets at times a wide gap between the speaker and the young man, as it does between Helena and Bertram; but as the speaker finds a role in the young man's life by advising him to get a child and continue the line, Helena symbolically involves herself in Bertram's class by getting his ancestral ring from him, and conceives his child. Yet Helena finds the experience itself problematic: 'so lust doth play / With what it loathes for that which is away' (4.4.24–5). Bertram's lovemaking was lust in action, with a woman he claims to hate. Its paradoxes are not unlike the paradox of lust itself, loathed and desired: 'All this the world well knows; yet none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell' (129.13–14).

Does all this mean that *All's Well* is a personal play, with Helena embodying Shakespeare's hopeless love for a cold-hearted aristocrat? Can we even see Parolles, a social climber claiming familiar acquaintance with those above him, as a comic self-

¹ See Roger Warren, 'Why Does It End Well? Helena, Bertram and the Sonnets', *S.Sur* 22 (1969), 79–92; Richard P. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies: Turn and Counter-Turn*, 1981, pp. 57–75; and David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays*, 2002, pp. 198–237.



2 'A Gentle Astringer' (see 5.1.6 SD). From George Turberville's *Booke of Faulconrie or Hawking* (London, 1575), part 2, p. 75

image? The same kind of question can be raised about *Love's Labour's Lost*, where Berowne finds himself, to his own chagrin, in love with a dark lady with a reputation for promiscuity. The problem is that the evidence cuts two ways: it can suggest that *All's Well* and *Love's Labour's Lost* are indeed more personal than we might have thought; or that the Sonnets are more a dramatist's invented story than we might have thought. We can at least say that Shakespeare as an artist was interested in the experience of loving hopelessly, obsessively, and against one's better judgement; and what interested him as an artist is likely to have interested him as a man. It is even possible that on another issue he identified not with Helena but with Bertram: R. B. Parker has suggested a link between Bertram's resentment at being forced to marry Helena and Shakespeare's own shotgun wedding.¹ This could apply both to the King's enforcement of the match and to Helena's appearance in the last scene, which declares, in effect, I'm pregnant and that settles it. When Bertram flees 'the dark house and the

¹ In a lecture at the Festival Theatre at Stratford, Ontario in July 2002. Parker is currently preparing his argument for publication.

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detested wife' (2.3.269), are we glimpsing Shakespeare's feelings as he heads for London?

These are questions that must remain as questions. The date of the play is equally elusive, and equally bound up with its relation to Shakespeare's other work. There are no references to the play earlier than the 1623 entry in the Stationer's Register that licenses its publication in the Folio. Frances Meres' tantalizing reference to *Love's Labour's Won* in *Palladis Tamia* (1598) used to be taken as a possible reference to *All's Well*, at least in an early version; not much credence is given to this suggestion now. Links to contemporary events that might help us pin down a date are more suggestive than decisive. The King's war policy – stay out of it, but let your young men fight if they want to – is not unlike Queen Elizabeth's policy for the Low Countries. Susan Snyder suggests another link with Elizabeth in Lavatch's complaint about a man being at a woman's command.¹ Both links, if they are there at all, could suggest a date just after the Queen's death. The play features a monarch dying and reborn: are we on the cusp between Elizabeth and James? We are left with the play's relation to the rest of the canon, and it is characteristic of our problem that its closest links are with the Sonnets, whose date of composition is a matter of dispute. They were first published in 1609, and the two that appeared in 1599 in *The Passionate Pilgrim* (138 and 144) are not closely linked with *All's Well*. (Sonnet 138, with its punning reference to lying together, could be seen as a kind of bed-trick, sex combined with deception, but the 1599 phrasing – 'Therefore I'll lie with love, and love with me' – blurs the effect.) In any case to establish echoes between *All's Well* and other Shakespeare texts leaves us with the chicken-or-egg problem: which came first?

Attempts at dating the play generally come down to comparisons of its style with those of works whose dates are more secure. There are outbreaks of what can seem an early manner in, for example, the gnomic rhyming couplets by which Helena persuades the King to try her skill; but there are other such outbreaks in middle-period plays. That *All's Well* is such a play is the current consensus. The convoluted prose of its first few speeches, which seems to be telling the audience they will have to listen closely, represents a manner (in both prose and verse) that can be seen in *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, a manner that continues in the openings of *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* and goes right through to the Shakespeare scenes of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. I have suggested earlier that *All's Well* picks up echoes from other plays (or are they anticipations?) in matters as important as the bed-trick and the experience of mourning, and as unimportant as the names of unseen characters. None of the plays it so echoes (or anticipates) can be confidently dated after 1604. If we see it as one of a group of plays in conversation with each other, this discourages a late date. *All's Well*, a play often regarded as peripheral, is arguably at the centre – at least the chronological centre – of Shakespeare's work, a period of stock-taking around the turn of the century when *Twelfth Night* ended the sequence of romantic comedies and *Henry V* the sequence of history plays, and the radically experimental *Troilus and*

¹ World's Classics introduction, p. 23.