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All's Well That Ends Well: On Seeing and Hearing the Opening Scene*

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Professor Levin's perceptive reading of the first 76 lines of *All's Well That Ends Well* brilliantly teases out the virtues that Shakespeare ascribes to the pair of elderly characters who enter and inhabit the stage space at the opening of the play. The manners and morals of the Folio's "Old Countess of Rossillion" and her family friend the "old lord Lafew" (3.6.100) are characterized as those of the gerontocracy that determines the conduct of affairs in this social group, and these two are set against Bertram, the Countess's son, the young count of Rossillion, and her ward Helena, as the "unseason'd" young.

The paper uses for evidence the glibness, the stiff figures and the general formality of speech given to the older characters, and the irritating topoi, the conventional parcels of advice to the young, which burden the dialogue. To support the general picture of a strained style, Polonius and his advice to Laertes and Hamlet's ramparts speech are invoked (somewhat unlikely though it may be that the Elizabethan audience would have recalled them from two years before). A short debate is introduced on the topical, but rather literary, issue of the influence of nature or nurture in Helena's upbringing and education, together with another discussion on the conflict of honesty or chastity in women.

All this is of considerable interest, and it must be assumed that the early audiences would have taken good note of the differences between the old and the young in views and attitudes. And yet a suspicion lingers that we have been hearing the thoughts of a reader of the play and not a

*Reference: Richard A. Levin, "The Opening of *All's Well That Ends Well*," *Connotations* 7.1 (1997/98): 18-32.

playgoer. It is likely that an audience would have been less preoccupied with such manifestations of gerontocracy than with things manifestly clear before their eyes, the behaviour of the younger generation. Levin rightly notes Helena's tears, increasing through her silence, and catching the Countess's attention, which in turn draws the audience's own attention to them. And it becomes apparent that if it is true that the beginning of a play has to lay down for the audience what to look for, what characters to focus on, what "theme" or idea to pursue, the maximum interest lies in the mystery behind Helena and the secrets and ambiguities, as yet unexplained, that lie between her and Bertram.

This becomes very apparent as soon as the play's opening scene switches from prose to poetry. After a brief transitional speech given to the Countess in verse as she more emotionally takes her leave of Bertram, at line 75 it is Helena, at last alone on the stage, who breaks fully into poetry:

> O were that all, I think not on my father . . . .

Not only does the poetry of the play begin with Helena's soliloquy, but the drama too. In fact, we are hearing a structural and histrionic direction in the change from prose to verse, and in Helena the change from silence and tears to emotional expression and poetry. Yet Levin chooses to cut short his opening scene at the point where the whole evidence of the subsequent play begins to justify the early lines of the Countess and Lafew, and partly explains the mystery of the discomforts of the comedy. What follows his perceptions actually puts them in perspective.

The missing dimension of Professor Levin's paper, I would suggest, is that of performance. The paper points to much useful detail for the stage: the black clothing, the force of prosaic speech, the silence of Helena, her tears, the Countess's concern as a mother, and much else. But the spirit of actual performance is hugely subtle, terribly elusive. To identify this spirit is to cage a butterfly, to try to catch steam in a bottle. For the visual and aural elements of performance must fuse and work together.

I would here offer, not an alternative reading of the play's beginning, but a parallel and complementary one calling for a somewhat different emphasis.

It is apparent to an audience that at the start of this comedy all is not at all well. Not only are the characters in mourning, but their disposition about the stage reveals their differences of station, feeling and attitude: first Helena's silence strongly hints that she is not one of the inner circle, then, at line 15, as she is referred to and made part of the group, Bertram's silence separates him in turn. The ponderous and enigmatic prose dialogue may well be a sign of the social proprieties of the speakers, but it also hints strongly at a suppression of thought and feeling that must soon be reversed by a language of rhythm and emotion, even rhyme, reverie and dream. In particular, spoken themes of departure and return, and birth and dying, seem to cloak and cloud a sense of matters unspoken.

The Folio's strong costume directive, *"all in blacke,"* controls Shakespeare's performance requirements in many ways, in slow pace and low tone, and in the sombre formality of movement and gesture, all to create a cheerless stage, so that from the start the audience is compelled to seek the sources of such misery and grief. We find these sources everywhere: mother and son mourn the dead husband and father, and everyone regrets the departure of Bertram; Helena too mourns her father's death, but also suffers the pain of unrequited love for Bertram, as will appear. This opening is very like Ibsen, rich with a tangled past, teasing the audience to listen between the lines.

We become increasingly aware of the physical pattern of the actors disposed about the acting space. Helena in particular is marked out by her plainer dress and her lower status, her likely curtsy and her long silence, to the point where the audience begins to see and hear with her eyes and ears, even begins to take her part. When Helena's silence is exchanged for Bertram's, we sense an almost sibling rivalry as the Countess appears to comfort Helena in her tears:

> No more of this. Helena: go to, no more . . . (47-48)

But Helena certainly moves apart for her riddling aside

> I do affect a sorrow, but I have it too, (50)

only to catch Bertram's scornful and ill-favoured words to her as he departs.

It is Helena who takes up the play's central theme of dying into life—with some of the most beautiful love poetry in the language, enhanced as it is by the contrasting formality of the prosaic opening and underscoring Levin's ideas about the conflict of youth and age in the play:

> my imagination
> Carries no favour in't but Bertram's.
> I am undone; there is no living, none,
> If Bertram be away; 'twere all one
> That I should love a bright particular star
> And think to wed it, he is so above me.
> In his bright radiance and collateral light
> Must I be comforted, not in his sphere.
> Th' ambition in my love thus plagues itself:
> The hind that would be mated by the lion
> Must die for love. (80-90)

Helena lets the poetry speak for her, and thus the audience lets Helena speak for it.

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