

Spring Lectures 2016, for the Angel Foundation, by Peter Milward

No.3, Saturday June 4, on *All's Well That Ends Well*

*Two plays* of Shakespeare classed as "problem comedies" for new King's Men  
at the beginning of the new reign of James I (Jacobean)

contemporaneous with two great tragedies of *Othello* and *King Lear*  
contrasting with fame of tragedies, heroines Desdemona and Cordelia

Both *Measure for Measure* with heroine Isabella, centring on bed-trick

and *All's Well That Ends Well* with heroine Helena, also centring on bed-trick  
plays no one reads today or sees performances on stage – utterly unpopular

*Yet take four plays* together in first two years of new reign, till end of 1605

we note four Marian heroines balancing four such heroines in last romances  
in between four plays without any such ideal heroines, identified with grace  
Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Volumnia and no heroines in *Timon*

among twelve plays by Shakespeare from 1604 to 1611 – four – four + four

*Now turn to AW* – specifically Catholic play, like MM

with heroine Helena playing two parts, miracle-worker and pilgrim

as curing fistula of French king with remedy from dead father Gerard de Narbon  
and going on pilgrimage to St James (Santiago) at Compostela

*Common theme* in both parts, Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son

with hero Bertram of Roussillon as prodigal husband running away from wife

parallel with KL with Lear as prodigal father banishing daughter

and H4 with Prince Hal as prodigal son, Falstaff as vice of prodigality

*Plot* beginning at Roussillon, all in mourning for recent deaths

Countess for death of noble husband, Helena for death of medical father

but Helena really mourning for love of Bertram, who doesn't love her

As young Earl, Bertram is summoned to court of French king in Paris

where king is dying of malady frustrating the congregated doctors

and Helena follows B to French court, with remedy left her by father

and the remedy proves to be effective – even miraculous

*Two views* of human agency expressed by Helena, depending on Man/ God

While still in Roussillon, in opening dialogue with worthless Parolles

"Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie/ Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated

sky gives us free scope." And later in Paris, in scene with French king, in tone of

incantation, "It is not so with him that all things knows/ As tis with us that square

our guess by shows/ But most it is presumption with us when/ The help of heaven we

count the act of men."

*Emphasis on "grace" and "miracle" with regard to Helena*

When she cures the king, "The greatest grace lending grace", and the king responds, "Methinks in thee some blessed spirit doth speak."

Prompting comment of Lord Lafeu, "They say miracles are past... A showing of a heavenly effect in an earthly actor... in a most weak and debile minister great power, great transcendence."

*Helena granted choice of husband among lords, and she chooses Bertram*

when against his will, he is obliged by the king to accept her, he goes through the ceremony of wedding, but runs away that night led by worthless Parolles (mere words) to the war in Florence

*Lamented* by his mother the Countess, who sides with Helena,

"What angel shall/ Bless this unworthy husband?/ He cannot thrive/ Unless her prayers, whom heaven delights to hear/ And loves to grant, reprieve him from the wrath/ Of greatest justice." (where Helena is compared to Mary)

*Thus* Helena now changes from miracle-worker to holy pilgrim

ostensibly to the shrine of St James at Compostela in North Spain

yet following Bertram to Florence in North Italy, out of her way

and there staying with Widow and her daughter Diana

where Bertram making sexual advances to Diana (as in case of MM)

There with Diana, as Isabella with Mariana, arranges *bed-trick*,

as she takes the place of Diana secretly in bed with Bertram

so as to get him with child and to receive his ring (as at end of MV)

With declaration of Diana, comparable to that of Duke/Friar in MM

"Only in this disguise I think't no sin/ To cozen him that would unjustly win"

*Then* movement of play back via Marseilles to Roussillon

as Helena pretends to have died, enabling Bertram to return home

while French king journeys to Roussillon to speak with Countess

and Helena comments on the words in the title of AW

"All's well that ends well yet,/ Though time seems so adverse, and means unfit."

*Now* the king professes to have forgiven Bertram, while offering other wife,

daughter of Lord Lafeu. "I have forgiven and forgotten all... Let him

not ask our pardon/ The nature of his great offence is dead."

But now Diana appears pleading (like Isabella in MM) for "justice"

proving her case with entrance of living Helena with Widow

now at last accepted by Bertram, "I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly."