

e-Luminations: All's Well That Ends Well

The Women of *All's Well*

Shakespeare's plays, for whatever reason, leave the relationship between mothers and daughters almost completely unexplored. Only *All's Well That Ends Well* comes close to giving us a substantial and affecting mother-daughter relationship. Indeed, the play offers the only scene in the canon in which an older woman—wise, noble and compassionate—takes a younger woman sensitively and affectionately under her wing.

The Countess of Rossillion is not Helena's mother (who we assume is long since dead), but she insists on being considered so: "I am your mother," she tells her "and put you in the catalogue of those / That were enwombed mine."

Helena initially resists, because it renders her secret desire for Bertram, the countess' son, incestuous. Once Helena discovers, however, that the countess whole-heartedly supports her designs on Bertram, she happily avails herself of the "mother's care" that the countess had promised. That turns out to include material support for her journey to Paris to win Bertram. The mother-daughter bond persists throughout the play, as the countess consistently champions Helena's interests over those of her son. When Helena reappears in the final scene, she greets her warmly as "my dear mother."

In addition, Helena forges a unique female confederacy in Florence with another mother-daughter pair, the Widow Capilet and her daughter, Diana.

Most Shakespearean comic heroines have confidants with whom to commiserate and scheme, but Helena, in plotting anew to ensnare Bertram, depends completely on strangers, who must, for her sake, take unprecedented risks. The bed-trick, perilous enough in itself, obliges these Italian women to join Helena in a long and arduous trek back to France, where Diana, once more standing in for Helena, must let Bertram scorn her as a whore when she claims him as a husband.

In some productions of the play, Helena, Diana and the widow are joined on their march by additional female allies, creating an impression, in a play rife with military imagery, of an alternative, all-female army, trekking off to do battle with male treachery.

—David McCandless

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