



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival.

2019 Study Guide



Lafew. Costume rendering by Alex Jaeger.

All's Well That Ends Well

by William Shakespeare

THE GOLDEN AGE OF HONOR

Renaissance England saw itself as a very modern society with lots of scheming and corruption. They viewed their age as more cynical and realistic than the simpler, more idealized images they had of the medieval age. A vogue developed in the early 1600s for plays that hearkened back to that seemingly simpler, more honorable age of chivalry. Most stories about young couples from different backgrounds present an older generation that is stodgily against the union, and a young couple who both want it to happen. Shakespeare, perhaps responding to this new vogue, creates an older generation that constantly laments and longs for a lost past where honor was about how you lived and where deeds spoke louder than words, and a younger generation that is, especially among its men, shallow and obsessed with appearances. Interestingly, the two young women in *All's Well That Ends Well* display a wisdom beyond their years and seem to belong to the older, more honorable age. *The Riverside Shakespeare* writes: "Shakespeare contrasts a vanished world of the past in which words were subordinate to facts with a debased present-day society in which language has become an empty and often a lying substitute for deeds."

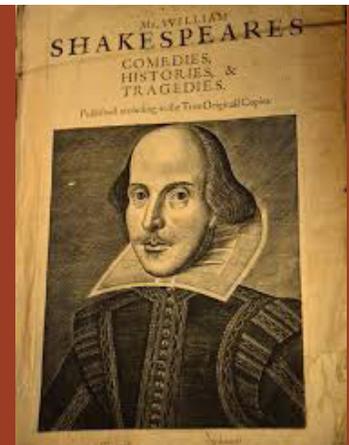


Giovanni Boccaccio, artist unknown

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

- Born in Florence, Italy in 1323
- Studied law at the Studium (now the University of Naples)
- Began writing his most famous work, *The Decameron*, in 1349. It contained 100 short stories plus a framing device. It was completed in 1352, and the original manuscript still exists today.
- His stories were adapted by Chaucer and Shakespeare, who used several episodes from *The Decameron* in his plays.
- Died in 1375.



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

- Born around April 23, 1564.
- Married Anne Hathaway at the age of 18. They had three children between 1583 and 1585.
- Became an actor and playwright for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men when King James I was crowned in 1603.
- Wrote 37 plays, 2 epic poems and 154 sonnets over a 25-year career.
- *All's Well That Ends Well* is based on a story by Giovanni Boccaccio.
- Died in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon, April 23, 1616.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. What is honor? What does it mean to behave honorably? In Shakespeare's day, what different things gave a man honor? What different things gave a woman honor? This and other websites provide information:
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honour>

2. What was the role of women in Elizabethan society? What social status did women have? This and other websites provide information:
<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/ideas/sexes.html>

3. How much choice did people generally have in who they would marry in Elizabethan society? How important was it to marry someone from the same social class? These and other websites provide information:
<http://elizabethan.org/compendium/10.html>
<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/society/marriage.html>
<http://www.william-shakespeare.info/elizabethan-wedding-customs.htm>

4. Describe some of the healing techniques employed during Shakespeare's time. Who were the different practitioners of healing? What training did they have? What part did magic, astrology and science play in medical practice? What part did prayers, herbs and minerals play? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-medicine-and-illnesses.htm>

5. What was the Elizabethan attitude toward virginity? What was the cult of the Virgin Queen inspired and promoted by Queen Elizabeth? Why was Queen Elizabeth associated with the goddess Diana? What magical qualities were attributed to virginity? These and other websites provide information:
<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/history/virgin.html>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portraiture_of_Elizabeth_I_of_England#The_cult_of_Elizabeth

6. Who is Saint Jacques? By what other names is he known? What emblem identified a person who had made the pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Jacques? What spiritual benefits did a pilgrim hope to gain? These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Way_of_St._James

7. Define scapegoat, both as a noun and as a verb. Under what circumstances is a scapegoat designated? What good is expected to result from scapegoating? These and other websites provide information:
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/scapegoat>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scapegoat>



Helen. Costume rendering by Alex Jaeger.

8. Research the military uses of the drum. These and other websites provide information:
www.historyofdrums.net/drum-history/military-drums/
<https://www.quora.com/Why-were-drums-used-in-war>

9. What is a "bed trick" in literature and drama? What is the fundamental premise of the bed trick? This and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bed_trick

10. What is the meaning of the proverb that gives the play its title? This and other websites provide information:
<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/all%27s+well+that+ends+well>

After seeing/reading the play

1. What changes have the deaths of Bertram's and Helena's fathers caused in each of their lives? Whose ward is each? What control, if any, does each have over their own actions? How does each respond to their situation? What do Helena and Bertram have in common? In what ways are their situations or circumstances different?

2. Refer to your research on healing techniques in Shakespeare's time. What is Helena's healing gift? What is her purpose in using it? How great is her confidence in her ability? According to the text, how exactly does she heal the King? How does the current production enact this event?

3. The word "if" occurs at least 100 times in the full text of *All's Well That Ends Well*. What does this lead you to expect? What circumstances or events in the play hinge on an "if"?

4. Refer to your research on honor. Some form of the word “honor” occurs 50 times in the full text of the play. What different types of honor is the play concerned with? In what ways is honor achieved in the play? In what ways is it lost? Is it ever regained, and, if so, how and by whom?

5. Some form of the word “noble” occurs more than 20 times in *All's Well That Ends Well*. How do different characters define nobility? What external qualities make a person noble? What internal qualities? Which type of nobility is important to which characters, and why?

6. Why does no one but Bertram have any respect for Parolles? Why does Bertram? Why does everyone but Bertram value and respect Helena? Why doesn't Bertram?

7. Refer to your research on the scapegoat. To what extent is Parolles to blame for Bertram's behavior? To what extent is Bertram's behavior a natural part of his character? In what situations does Parolles influence Bertram, and in what situations or to what degree does he not?

8. Refer to your research on Elizabethan attitudes towards virginity, women and marriage. What is Parolles's attitude toward virginity? Bertram's? Diana's? What is Helena's attitude toward virginity? To what extent is her desire to call her own shots in this regard typical or unusual?

9. What do you think of Bertram's behavior in Act II, scene 3, when he refuses to marry or love Helena as commanded by the King? What are Bertram's specific objections to Helena? To what extent does he feel she is beneath him, and to what extent does he just not love her? How does this production portray their past and present relationship? To what extent, if any, do you blame Bertram at this point in the play?

10. Refer to your research on the bed trick. Why does Helena resort to the bed trick? What does her use of it tell us about her? What does Bertram's reaction to it tell us about him?

11. What happens to Parolles? How fitting is his punishment? Which of his qualities do you find pardonable? Which unpardonable? Who rescues him, and why?

12. What happens to Bertram in the final scene? Which of his actions do you find pardonable? Which unpardonable? How fitting or satisfying do you find the outcome of his journey?

13. If you are also seeing *As You Like It*, compare and contrast the journey of Helena and Bertram to the following couples: Silvius and Phoebe, Oliver and Celia, Rosalind and Orlando.

14. If you are also seeing *As You Like It*, compare and contrast the court in that play with the court in *All's Well That Ends Well*.

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>
<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>



Left, Bertram.
Costume rendering
by Alex Jaeger.



Right, the Countess.
Costume rendering
by Alex Jaeger.

“The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.”

—First Lord, Act IV, scene 3

Shakespeare's main plotline for *All's Well That Ends Well* is a close adaptation of a story from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a collection of stories written in Italy 200 years earlier and available to Shakespeare in a recent English translation. Shakespeare told the story for the most part the same way, but he made one significant change. He also, as he usually did, invented entirely new sub-plots which reinforce the play's main theme of honor. *All's Well That Ends Well* explores many different kinds of honor; honor won by going to war, honor granted by social class and high birth, honor gained by good deeds, honor bestowed by the king, and more. Most importantly of all, the play is about innate, inner honor and goodness, and how it can exist in any human being, regardless of social status, age or gender. Boccaccio's original story focuses entirely on the class distinction between Helena and Bertram. She is a social inferior, the King is reluctant to agree to a marriage between the two, and nobody would blame Bertram if he felt the same. Much of the story involves Helena, through her deeds over a long period of time, proving an inner worth, an inner honor and nobility.

In his stage adaptation, Shakespeare shortens the timeframe significantly. He presents a woman whose inner honor and innate nobleness are recognized more or less immediately by almost everyone around her, and a King who has no reluctance whatsoever in marrying her to a nobleman. Shakespeare even heightens the outward difference between Helena and Bertram by referring to Helena as "a poor doctor's daughter," whereas Boccaccio presented the physician and his daughter as wealthy in their own right. In Boccaccio she is rich and honorable, but her lack of aristocratic status is enough to give the King pause. In Shakespeare she is poor and a commoner, but so full of honor and inner nobility that the King has no problem with her. Nor does Bertram's mother the Countess, who thinks so highly of Helena that she says if Bertram does her wrong, "his sword can never win the honor that he loses." In other words, all his desire to win honor on the battlefield will be in vain if he fails to recognize and respond favorably to the honor in Helena.

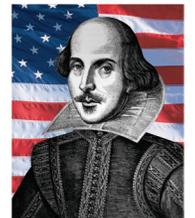


Model of the *All's Well That Ends Well* set, designed by Mariana Sanchez.

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