

## Behind the Happily-Ever-After: Shakespeare's Use of Fairy Tales and *All's Well That Ends Well*

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### *Abstract*

Fairy tales were a very important part of early modern popular culture. Not only did they provide people with much needed entertainment, they offered a means of exploring one's most secret dreams and deepest anxieties. Beneath their enchanting exteriors, fairy tales contain certain recurrent emotional situations, which are actually quite primitive in nature. Shakespeare recognised this, and drew on these popular tales in his plays not just for their entertaining storylines, but for their emotional models, too. This allowed him to connect with his audience on an intimate, perhaps subconscious level. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, one of the playwright's most undervalued plays, Shakespeare drew heavily on fairy tales – but on the darker aspects of these stories. Understanding not only why but how Shakespeare used fairy tales as sources offers a new perspective on the play and may help to collapse *All's Well's* 'unfortunate' reputation.

*Keywords:* *All's Well That Ends Well*, Fairy Tales, Folk Sources, Oral Culture, Psychoanalysis.

### 1. *Neglected Sources*

Shakespeare seems to have preferred reworking established tales to inventing his own. It is no secret that the chronicles of Holinshed and Plutarch's *The Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* were the inspiration for Shakespeare's history and Roman plays; and that many of his romances and comedies drew on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and popular romance; or that Italian *novelle* motivated several of his comedies and tragedies. All these renowned sources are in written, literary forms and are still accessible. There is, however, another deep well of inspiration from which Shakespeare drew which has until now largely been overlooked: the treasure trove of traditional oral stories in circulation in Shakespeare's time – folk- and fairy tales.<sup>1</sup>

The general neglect of folk- and fairy tales by Shakespearean scholars of both literature and early modern popular culture is understandable: these old stories are elusive and difficult to trace. Created by anonymous oral storytellers and passed on by word of mouth for countless generations, fairy tales' origins are obscure. Only when (and if) they make their way into the literary record can we sketch their history. The majority of the stories that we know today as folk- and fairy tales were recorded for the first time during the nineteenth

century, well after Shakespeare's era (Ashliman 2004, 12). Our ignorance of oral fairy tales before 1800 is compounded by the fact that the research done on these old stories is now itself getting old;<sup>2</sup> and most new scholarly work on the general subject of fairy stories necessarily uses written versions of the tales which appeared post-1800 because of the scarcity of earlier written versions. But admitting the elusiveness of such unwritten sources should not deter us from examining the area: the evidence contained in Shakespeare's plays alone, especially *All's Well That Ends Well*, reveals their ubiquitous influence.

Catherine Belsey's recent *Why Shakespeare?* makes an original contribution to this relatively unexplored area of Shakespeare scholarship. As she herself makes clear, 'There has not been a great deal of critical interest in Shakespeare's links with ... fireside tales' (2007, 17).<sup>3</sup> Belsey argues that Shakespeare's continued popularity among modern audiences has to do with his use of folk- and fairy tale storylines, which show a parallel durability and appeal. While the significance of Belsey's insightful book is unquestionable, it is very short and is intended to be suggestive rather than in any way exhaustive. Her approach begs further analyses and expansion, especially with regard to the plays she has not considered, such as *All's Well That Ends Well*.

Shakespeare, I believe, was too shrewd a playwright to neglect such a rich resource, and regularly drew on old wives' tales in his plays, putting his audience's familiarity with them to work in new and surprising ways. With this in mind, I will suggest a new way of approaching *All's Well That Ends Well*, a consistently misunderstood drama, suggesting not only *why* but also *how* Shakespeare used fairy tales as sources. In so doing, I hope to offer an innovative perspective on both the play and the playwright's creative processes, which can be extended to analyses of other works by Shakespeare.

## 2. *Fireside Fancies*

Fairy tales were a very important part of early modern popular culture. They were invaluable as a means of entertainment in this pre-industrial society, making 'long nights seeme short, and heauy toyles easie', as the author of a popular seventeenth-century chapbook put it (Johnson 1965, 2). In Shakespeare's day, the majority of England was still a farming community and the year was organised around agricultural concerns. Working-hours were determined by the weather; and the northern climate could be harsh. In winter, farming was limited to a few hours a day, and it became largely impossible during the coldest months over Christmas. With no electric light or central heating, Elizabethans spent many long and dreary nights, Sundays, and Christmas holidays crowded around the fireside. This is the context in which fairy tales flourished.

Stories were an inveighing way of distracting people from the boredom of unoccupied hours. Henry Bourne, a cleric in Newcastle-upon-Tyne with an interest in the habits of the common people, wrote in 1725: 'Nothing is

commoner in Country Places than for a whole Family in a Winter's Evening, to sit around the Fire, and tell stories of Apparitions and Ghosts' (quoted in Spufford 1981, 5). Robert Burton, writing in the early 1600s, expands on the point, listing the recreations available in winter '[to] busy our minds with': cards, chess and other such games; music, singing, dancing; jests, riddles, catches; and, importantly, 'merry tales of errant Knights, Kings, Queenes, Lovers, Lords, Ladies, Giants, Dwarfes, Theeves, Cheaters, Witches, Fayries, Goblins, Friers, &c' (Burton 1990, 79). This list could conceivably belong to the *dramatis personae* of a number of Shakespeare's plays.

Even in London, the servants, maids, and nurses of the urban and elite would tell old wives' tales to divert themselves from the monotony of domestic chores, or to entertain a young lordling in his nursery. 'The fashion when I was a boy', John Aubrey recalls, was 'for the maydes to sitt-up late by the fire tell old Romantique stories of the old time, handed down to them with a great deal of alteration' (1972, 445). Reginald Scot similarly attributed the spread of folktales to 'old doting women' and 'our mother's maids' (1886, 122). While these entertaining tales would have been particularly popular with children, as they are today, they were not restricted to the young. Philip Sidney maintained that a poet, a 'maker of fictions', tells 'a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner' (Sidney 2002, 92). Another of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Richard Johnson, used an old tale in his popular early seventeenth-century chapbook, claiming it would appeal to a broad audience: 'The ancient Tales of *Tom Thumbe* in the olde time, haue beene the onely reuiuers of drouzy age at midnight; old and young ... Batchelors and Maides ... the old Shepheard and the young Plow boy ... haue carold out a Tale of *Tom Thumbe* to make merry with' (Johnson 1965, 2). Chapbooks like this one, as well as other printed texts like ballads and jest-books, often featured fairy tales, and were very popular in Shakespeare's day, even among the aristocracy (see Burke 1994, 26-28). John Clare admits he used to save every penny he could to buy the 'sixpenny Romances, of "Cinderella", "Little Red Riding Hood", "Jack and the Beanstalk", "Zig-Zag", "Prince Cherry", etc.', when 'hawkers offerd them for sale at the door' (*Sketches in the Life of John Clare*, in Robinson 1983, 5-6). Presumably the 'hawkers' were pedlars like Autolycus from *The Winter's Tale*.

Great dramatists recognise a good story when they hear one; Shakespeare *used* these popular traditional tales, both relying on and exploiting his audience's familiarity with such tried and tested plotlines. Perhaps, however, the dramatist drew on these old stories for another, more subtle reason, one which offers a new way of approaching his plays and goes far to explain his remarkable popularity.

### 3. *Children's Tales?*

The traditional folk- and fairy tales with which Shakespeare would have been familiar provided *more* than entertaining stories and simple distractions. They

served a very important function, especially in a society where disease, death, social injustice, and food shortages were rampant. As Bruno Bettelheim suggests, traditional fairy tales provide emotional support:

Each fairy tale is a magic mirror which reflects some aspects of our inner world, and of the steps required by our evolution from immaturity to maturity. For those who immerse themselves in what the fairy tale has to communicate, it becomes a deep quiet pool which at first seems to reflect only our own image, but behind it we soon discover the inner turmoils of our soul – its depth, and ways to gain peace within ourselves and with the world, which is the reward of our struggles. (1976, 309)

Unfortunately, nowadays, this suggestive and psychologically complex aspect of fairy tales has generally been forgotten or eclipsed. This further accounts for why we have neglected these stories as possible sources for Shakespeare's plays. We tend to dismiss fairy tales as childish. Despite the dark, Jungian adaptations by Angela Carter, we generally disregard them as serious works in their own right.<sup>4</sup> They're simple stories set in fantastic worlds 'where wishing still does some good' (Ashliman 2004, 38). Fairy tales, by definition, contain a strong make-believe content: they recount fantasies and wishes, not truth. Great literature and drama should be about life-like characters in believable contexts. Surely Shakespeare, then, one of the most influential dramatists of all time, would not have relied on far-fetched children's tales.

Disney has, of course, helped to instil the perception of fairy tales as naive children's stories. Most people today are exposed to such narratives only in the prettified and simplified versions made for the big screen. Unfortunately, these forms suppress fairy tales' traditional meaning and deprive them of any deeper significance. For thousands of years, fairy tales have been a resource of *adults*. But our popular culture has transformed them from products created 'of the people' (an earlier meaning of the term 'popular') to empty-minded entertainment 'for the people'.<sup>5</sup> And in the process, fairy tales have lost much of what gave them their enduring appeal.

#### 4. *Beneath the Happily-Ever-After*

Behind their simple and enchanting exteriors, traditional fairy tales satisfy a number of personal needs. Perhaps most obviously, they provide a means for us to explore our most secret dreams and desires. Here, youngest children always prove most successful; unnoticed little boys can prove themselves and win princesses; and lowly servant girls can advance from kitchen to castle. This fundamental element of hope is one of the most alluring features of such stories.

As well as wish fulfilment, fairy tales provide a safe space in which to acknowledge and confront our deepest fears and most profound anxieties. A girl is forced to marry a hideous beast, but he turns out to be a handsome

prince. A bloodthirsty ogre threatens to devour a boy, but he uses his wits and escapes unscathed. Fairy tales assure us that 'a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence – but ... if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious' (Bettelheim 1976, 9).

A chief purpose of fairy tales, then, is to express our conscious and subconscious fears and desires. The fictional characters and events externalise our overwhelming but often formless emotional turmoils, allowing us to give voice to and confront such issues in a safe, imaginary realm, and come back to reality more reassured. Each story is an 'enabling device', as Maria Tatar put it (2002, xiv). Accordingly, fairy tales contain certain recurrent emotional situations: jealousy; hate; fear of death, rejection, and abandonment; anxiety over sex, courtship, and marriage; the desire to prove oneself, be recognised, be loved; and so on. These recurrent emotional situations, or 'terrifying truths of the inner life' (Orgel 1996, 17), are distillations of universal human issues – they are the purest expression of our collective psyches.

For this reason, fairy tales have often been compared to dreams. Both forms seem to express or release deep-rooted and often taboo human emotions buried deep in the subconscious.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare himself appeared to recognise the connection between the two forms. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, a veritable fairy tale from start to finish, repeatedly and deliberately points up its relationship to dreams. The four leading characters are led to believe (by magical fairies) that the disordered and fantastic experiences of a night in the forest (a typical fairy-tale setting) were but the events of a strange dream. And at the end of the play, Puck bids the whole audience to see the entire performance as the contents of a dream: 'this weak and idle theme, / No more yielding but a dream' (*Epilogue*, 6-7).<sup>7</sup>

As so often in dreams, the underlying emotional material at the heart of fairy tales is actually disturbingly primitive. Indeed, fairy tales have persuaded psychologists and folklorists to uncover just how violent, sexual, and potent their basic emotional subtexts are (see, for example, Dundes 1987, 3-46). In some fairy stories, little boys burn witches, husbands murder their wives, and fathers seek to wed their daughters. It is this murky side that makes these wonder tales so important psychologically. *Little Red Ridinghood* is a prime example. On the surface it seems a cautionary tale about listening to your mother and not straying from the path of obedience. But this surface simplicity hides an underlying complexity about a young woman's sexual curiosity and the danger of being seduced by, and falling into bed with, entirely the wrong sort of man – a predator.

Significantly, the dark and complex emotional dramas which undergird and motivate the fairy-tale narrative are *latent*. They linger suggestively *below* the surface of the story. This is possible because in these stories nothing is stated

outright: 'Even fairy tales, with their naive sense, their tenacious materialism, their reworking of familiar territory, and their sometimes narrow imaginative range, rarely send unambiguous messages' (Tatar 2002, xv). Fairy tales communicate to us via symbols and images which have various layers of meaning, some literal and some obscure. Part of their charm is that these symbols can be interpreted differently by different people. In 'Rapunzel', a story in the Brothers Grimm's collection, for example, a young woman lets down her hair to give her prince charming access to her secret chamber, and later discovers her clothes have become too tight. No doubt adults would understand this quite differently from children.

The symbolic imagery of fairy tales allows the great majority of people to shrug them off as trivial escapist fantasies. It is often possible to take them at face value or to focus on their enchantments and happily-ever-afters, but their characteristic happy endings often follow a journey which is quite dark; a voyage through our deep inner anxieties, which stem from our primal drives. This material, upon closer examination, is in fact very 'adult' in nature. But, because it is usually subsumed beneath the more child-like narrative, it works at a sub- or unconscious level, and can therefore be overlooked (or, as in Disney's case, cut out all together).

### 5. Shakespeare's Use of Fairy Tales

Even on a superficial level, many of Shakespeare's plays seem to recall fairy tales – the plots, motifs, and characters could have been lifted from any number of such stories. Jumped-up country girls and servants manage to find rich, handsome princes (*All's Well That Ends Well*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Winter's Tale*); love can be stimulated with a few drops of a fairy potion (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*); youngest children prove to be the most worthy (*King Lear*, *As You Like It*); the dead can come back to life (*Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles, Cymbeline*); and the living can seem dead with the help of a magical breath-stilling tonic (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Cymbeline*). I propose, however, that Shakespeare borrowed more than just superficial elements from fairy tales: he recognised and utilised the potent emotional dramas such tales encode, too. Fairy tales may initially attract their audiences by being entertaining, but they *maintain* rapt listeners by connecting with each member on an individual and emotional level. In drawing on fairy tales, then, Shakespeare was also evoking their rich emotional and personal resonances. This allowed him to add layers of subtle meaning to his plays, and to connect with his audience on a private, perhaps subconscious level.

### 6. *All's Well That Ends Well* – a Fairy Tale for Adults

Among Shakespeare's plays, *All's Well That Ends Well* has attracted comparatively little critical attention. It has, in fact, been almost entirely dismissed as an unsuccessful comedy. As a result, *All's Well* was categorised, along with other plays written about the same time in the early 1600s, as a 'problem play'.<sup>8</sup> Today,

critics tend to approach the play with more of an open mind than in the past, but it is still generally regarded as having or presenting distinctive 'problems'.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the plot causes discomfort, not least the 'bedtrick', where Helena tricks the unwitting Bertram into sleeping with her. 'Everyone who reads this play is at first shocked and perplexed by the revolting idea which underlies the plot. It is revolting; there is no doubt about it', said the first Arden editor (Brigstocke, ed., 1904, xv). Less prudish critics are still disturbed by the play's dark tone. Rather than charming us with the romantic optimism of comedies like *Love's Labour's Lost* or *As You Like It*, *All's Well* seems to present the 'seamier side' of life, as Geoffrey Bullough put it (1958, vol. II, 380). We are not even certain, at the end of this supposed comedy, if all is indeed well.<sup>10</sup>

The play's characters do little to help the situation. Bertram has been overwhelmingly condemned, with most people content to follow Dr. Johnson's renowned estimation of him as

a man noble without generosity, and young without truth; who marries Helen as a coward, and leaves her as a profligate: when she is dead by his unkindness, sneaks home to a second marriage, is accused by a woman whom he has wronged, defends himself by falsehood, and is dismissed to happiness. (Quoted in Snyder, ed., 1993, 26)

Helena is praised by the play's characters as virtuous, but most critics find her behaviour puzzling at best, downright repellent at worst: 'I cannot reconcile my heart to Helen', says Susan Snyder, condensing general opinion of the heroine in the style of Dr. Johnson, 'a woman who pursues and captures, not once but twice, a man who doesn't want her; uses trickery in order to force herself on him sexually; and finally consolidates her hold on her husband to a chorus of universal approbation' (30). On the whole, as one critic aptly summarises, '*All's Well* perplexes more than it satisfies, and repels more than it attracts' (Lawrence 1922, 448).

### 7. *Shakespeare's Literary Source*

Shakespeare's acknowledged source for *All's Well* is Boccaccio's novella in *The Decameron*, Day III, Story 9. The playwright probably knew the tale from William Painter's close translation of it in *The Palace of Pleasure*, published in 1566 and reprinted in 1569 and in 1575 (in Bullough 1958, vol 2, 389-396). *The Decameron* is a fourteenth-century Italian collection of 100 novellas, told over 10 days. Although a written collection, the *Decameron* has an intimate relationship with oral stories, and this is reflected within its own text. The frame tale tells of a group of seven women and three men who, to flee from a plague epidemic, take shelter in a villa in the countryside near Florence where they pass their evenings by telling each other stories. These stories, recounted orally to the group, make up the 100 novellas. Many classical, medieval and

early modern texts, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, or Peele's *Old Wives' Tale*, present their stories as being told orally, reflecting the illusory boundary between oral and written forms that existed in those days. This is further evidenced if we consider the communal mode of transmission of many written stories like Boccaccio's: 'there is no question that oral reading and recitation were common means by which medieval audiences received romances' (Huot 2000, 73).<sup>11</sup> Tale III.9 of the *Decameron* has obvious roots in two folktales: 'The Dragon-Slayer' and 'The Man Who Deserted His Wife' (ATU 300 and ATU 891 respectively).<sup>12</sup> It would seem quite possible that Boccaccio heard these tales orally, for in no other literary work do these two stories appear together (Lawrence 1922, 448).

### 8. Folk Sources

Most people admit that *All's Well* has a 'fairy-tale feel' to it, and a recent production of the play, directed by Marianne Elliott and presented by Britain's National Theatre in 2009, was conspicuously based on a fairy-tale atmosphere. It was even described as being 'a fairy tale for adults' by the *Daily Telegraph*.<sup>13</sup> But the idea that *All's Well* may have actual fairy-tale sources has largely been ignored.

As early as 1922, however, William Lawrence pointed out that the play is clearly based on two different fairy-tale types or analogues, which he termed 'the healing of the king' (subsequently categorised as ATU 300) and 'the fulfilment of the tasks' (ATU 891). The significance of Lawrence's identification of the play's folk ties cannot be doubted; as G. K. Hunter noted, he brought about a 'revolution in our attitude to *All's Well* in terms of source material (1959, xxx). And whenever critics do mention *All's Well*'s fairy-tale links, Lawrence is cited as the authority. But Lawrence's work has had less impact than one would expect. Rather than picking up the clues he left almost a century ago, critics have instead shied away from examining or uncovering *All's Well*'s fairy-tale roots. The reason for this avoidance could lie in the fact that Lawrence's analysis of the fairy-tale sources and their bearing on the play is lacking. He fails to perceive any deeper meaning to the traditional tales. Like the Disney productions today, he divorces the stories from their potent emotional subtexts, particularly any potentially murky subtexts.<sup>14</sup> In his eyes, the tales are merely charming narratives about clever but simple folktale protagonists, who behave virtuously despite their testing, and are unreservedly rewarded with happily-ever-afters. Given that Shakespeare incorporated such tales into his play, Lawrence insists that *All's Well* should therefore be interpreted in the same light (1922, 463). This reductive interpretation of *All's Well*'s folk sources has helped to strengthen a general perception of the play as being poorly constructed. Various critics see *All's Well* having two opposing threads: 'fairy tale', which encompasses the idealistic and magical elements of the play, as



well as Lawrence's interpretation; and 'realism', which contains all the gritty problems (emotional, psychological, moral) of the play that Lawrence's optimistic reading could not quite satisfy.<sup>15</sup> The darker 'realistic' thread of *All's Well* is perceived to undercut or fight against the romantic 'fairy tale' thread, leaving us with a play that lacks a distinct sense of unity – a 'problem play'.

But I suggest it is possible to approach the play from a different angle, and in so doing get behind some of its problems.

### 9. *Stirring Up Emotions*

The reason, I believe, for *All's Well's* unfortunate reputation is that the play draws deeply on fairy tales – but on the darker aspects of these stories.

In *All's Well*, Shakespeare takes the usually dormant emotional content in his fairy-tale sources, which is often quite disturbing, and agitates and enhances it, so that it seethes dangerously close to the narrative surface, threatening to boil over and overwhelm the optimistic story line. The dramatist gives voice to all the difficult emotional and moral tensions which fairy tales traditionally only symbolically represent (and Boccaccio doesn't represent at all). How would it feel to be the trophy blithely given away like an object? What's wrong with a woman lustily chasing after the man she desires, or choosing how she loses her virginity? How rigid is the line between determination and obsession, right and wrong? In this light, the perceived split in the play between the romantic fairy-tale elements and the grisly realistic elements is erroneous. The darker, emotionally complex elements of *All's Well* do not fight against the fairy tale elements: they comment on them, because they are *part* of the fairy tale. Rather than oversimplifying the play, in other words, the folktale strains complicate it.

*All's Well*, then, is a play where extremely 'adult' subjects, like pursuing a sex object and losing one's virginity, are placed inside an 'envelope' that seems to involve more child-like narrative expectations. The clash is not between realism and fairy tale, in that case, but as a fairy tale, between adult subjects and child-like narrative expectations. It's as if Shakespeare is anticipating (as always) modern insights into the disturbingly primitive material of so-called children's stories. As Terry Eagleton observed, 'though in many ways we appear to have left Shakespeare's age behind, there are other ways in which we have yet to catch up with him' (1987, 5).

### 10. *The Mingled Yarn*

Shakespeare's ingenious use of folktales is evident in the second half of *All's Well*, particularly in the characterisation of and the relationship between Diana, Helena, and Bertram. For this part of the play, Shakespeare drew on the latter half of Boccaccio's tale III.9.

Boccaccio based the second part of his story on a very popular type of folktale, ATU 891, 'The Man Who Deserted His Wife'. This tale type has numerous variants, across many cultures, which were documented most recently by Hans-Jörg Uther in 2004. In stories of this type, a man marries a clever woman, but then quickly deserts her, leaving her with a set of ostensibly impossible tasks (one of which is to bear him a child) to fulfil before he will accept her as wife. The wife follows her husband in disguise, and by some deception manages to sleep with him without being recognised. She goes home and gives birth to his child (or children). When the husband returns and sees the child, he acknowledges his wife's fulfilment of the tasks and the pair lives happily ever after.<sup>16</sup> The following Arabian tale, 'The Sultan's Camp Followers', is a good example:

A sultan is impressed with a poor saddlemaker's daughter's ability to pose riddles, and so he marries her. He abandons her untouched, however, setting out for war instead. She follows him to his camp, disguised as a man, and the pair plays a game of chess. She lets him win, and as a prize offers to let him sleep with her slave woman. She then disguises herself as the slave woman, sleeps with her unwitting husband, and conceives a child by him. This happens twice more, before the sultan learns the truth and finally accepts his wife and children.<sup>17</sup>

Boccaccio follows the narrative tradition quite closely. The count Beltramo marries and then abandons Giletta, without sleeping with her, and flees to war in Italy, where he falls for a Florentine gentlewoman. Contrary to the source tales, however, the Florentine woman is not Giletta in disguise, but a distinct person. Perhaps this change was motivated by the desire for a more realistic story, or possibly Boccaccio was inspired by a closely related group of folktales, ATU 1379, in which the wife is always distinct from the mistress (who tends to be a maid serving in the husband's house). Poggio Bracciolini provides us with an early European example in 'An English Dyer who Had an Adventure with His Wife', which goes as follows:

A married man asked his pretty serving-maid to grant him certain favours. The maid told his wife, who advised her to agree to the man's wishes. At the arranged time, the wife went instead of the serving-maid to the secret meeting place, and so the man committed adultery with his own wife.<sup>18</sup>

Despite Boccaccio's separating Giletta from the Florentine mistress, he fails to develop the latter's character. She is simply a device. We know nothing of her except that she is 'a gentlewoman, very poore and of small substance', who is nevertheless 'of right and honest life and good report' (Painter 1958, 393). Boccaccio does not even give her a name.

Like Boccaccio, Shakespeare makes the 'other' woman distinct from Helena, but he diverges from his literary source by building the character up

considerably. His inspiration seems to have come from the oral stories at the heart of Boccaccio's narrative. With Diana, as we shall see, Shakespeare shows his familiarity with the oral tradition, and his ability to read between the lines and dramatise the hidden meaning contained therein.

In folktales of both type 891 and 1379, the husbands' intended mistresses are all of one sort: they are maids, slaves, servants, or virgins. They are, in other words, vulnerable, powerless, and submissive.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, the wives are shown to be the opposite. Each tale makes a point of noting the wife's cleverness. Often, it is this cleverness that wins them the men in the first place, as in 'The Sultan's Camp Followers' quoted above, where the heroine's skill at posing riddles attracts her husband.<sup>20</sup> The wives' cleverness seems to imply a certain level of assertiveness or competence. Indeed, it would appear that this same quality, which may have initially seemed attractive, is part of what scares the men off without consummating the marriage. A resourceful woman, whose wits are often more than a match for her husband, is also an intimidating woman.

The fact that the folktale husbands all flee before consummating their marriages (and sometimes even insist against it) hints at an underlying fear of female sexuality.<sup>21</sup> No doubt such anxieties would have been brought about or at least exacerbated by the idea of submitting to a sharp-witted, capable woman. It is telling that the men escape their wives' beds for activities like war or hunting.<sup>22</sup> These typically male environments are far less threatening to their masculinity and dominance.

Considering this, it is not surprising that when the folktale husbands do decide to sleep with a woman, she is meek and unthreatening. The wives, then, by disguising themselves as slaves or serving girls, are not merely hiding their features, but their personalities too. They transform themselves into what their husbands need in order to assuage their sexual anxieties: unthreatening and exploitable objects.

Boccaccio either doesn't see or chooses to overlook these potent sexual undercurrents. He ignores the hint that the folktale husbands' motivations for leaving their wives may have sexual roots, and instead bases Beltramo's rejection and desertion of Giletta on an *external* reason: her low status. The count is shocked when he learns Giletta is to be his wife since he sees her as 'not to be of a stocke convenable to his nobility' (Painter 1958, 391); so he leaves for Italy straight after the ceremony, where he is sure he will be received in a manner more befitting his noble status (391-392).<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, the woman Beltramo falls for in Italy is of even lower status than Giletta. While this accords with the source tales, it seems inconsistent with Beltramo's earlier sentiment. This reveals that Boccaccio was less concerned with the psychological motivations behind the characters' actions than with the actions themselves. It doesn't particularly matter whom Beltramo chooses to sleep with, as long as it is not Giletta. Accordingly, the Florentine mistress remains a device. Unlike Boccaccio, Shakespeare recognises the primitive

subtext driving the folktale storylines, and he not only pushes it to the surface, but enhances and emphasises it too.

Diana, the Florentine maid, is a paragon of symbolic interpretation. She embodies precisely what the folktale husbands desire, but which is only *implied* in the oral stories. She is beautiful, chaste, modest, honest – and powerless. As both a poor maid and the daughter of a widow, she is extremely vulnerable, especially in the patriarchal and hierarchical society of the day. Perhaps more important than all these aspects, however, is the fact that she chastely rebuffs Bertram's advances: 'she is armed for him and keeps her guard / In honestest defence' (3.5.70-71). 'I spoke with her', Bertram eagerly confides to a friend, 'And found her wondrous cold' (3.6.103-104). The combination of Diana's blushing hesitancy and her vulnerability awakens and inflames Bertram's lust. 'Stand no more off', he begs her, 'But give yourself unto my sick desires / Who then recovers' (4.2.35-38).

Helena, by contrast, extinguishes Bertram's desire; she is Diana's foil. Although she begins the play as a self-effacing physician's daughter, pining over an idealised love for Bertram, by the time she is married to the young count she has wealth, power, and the king's backing: 'Virtue and she / Is her own dower; honour and wealth from me' (2.3.139-140). She has proven herself exceedingly resourceful, 'A showing of heavenly effect in an earthly / actor!' (2.3.22-23), as well as determined and assertive: 'Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, / Which we ascribe to heaven' (1.1.199-200). She not only mirrors the clever wives of the folktales, she exceeds them, pushing the envelope of her generic type. Helena is also presented as overtly sexual.<sup>24</sup> Her undisguised desire for Bertram comes out first in her discussion with Parolles, where she muses on virginity, 'How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking?' (1.1.140) – a very radical expression of sexual desire from a woman. Soon thereafter she laments that her 'wishing well [for Bertram] had not a body in't / Which might be felt' (168-169). Later, she goes so far as to beg Bertram for a kiss: 'Strangers and foes do sunder and not kiss' (2.5.81).<sup>25</sup> Where Diana plays 'hard to get', Helena openly and unashamedly throws herself at Bertram.

Bertram, an 'unbaked and doughy youth' (4.5.30), is visibly repelled by Helena. When he is informed he will be marrying her, his initial shocked response recalls Beltramo's: 'A poor physician's daughter, my wife? Disdain / Rather corrupt me ever' (2.3.111-112). But the king quickly quashes this excuse, saying that he will build her status up (113-114). Bertram then reveals that he simply 'cannot love' Helena 'as a maid' (138-141). It is not her rank, in other words, that motivates Bertram's unwillingness to marry Helena, but some other, *internal* reason.<sup>26</sup> We get a hint as to what this may be after the wedding. Bertram agrees to the ceremony, on account of the king's bullying, but no amount of harassment could make him sleep with his new bride. He vehemently refuses to consummate the marriage: 'Although before the solemn priest I have sworn, / I will not bed her'; and again, 'I'll ... never bed her'

(2.3.253-254; 257). Indeed, on the very night '[w]hen [he] should take possession of the bride' (2.5.24), he decides to flee to Italy. He will not so much as kiss his new wife (2.5.78-82).

Bertram, then, recoils from Helena because of her forbidding sexuality. This is further emphasised by Parolles, Bertram's close companion, who articulates the count's dread: 'He wears his honour in a box unseen', says Parolles,

That hugs his kicky-wicky here at home,  
 Spending his manly marrow in her arms,  
 Which should sustain the bound and high curvet  
 Of Mars's fiery steed. (2.3.263-267)

Bertram fears being sexually dominated by his wife and losing his masculinity. It is no accident that he, like all the folktale husbands, flees to a very manly activity. War is much easier to navigate than the emotional and sexual intricacies of a relationship: 'Wars no strife / To the dark house and the detested wife' (2.3.275-276).<sup>27</sup> Similarly, it is not surprising that Bertram should fall for a poor Florentine maid. Unlike Helena, Diana presents no threat to Bertram's masculinity or his control. On the contrary, her vulnerability and sexual naivety are clear from the outset: 'Beware / of [men], Diana; their promises, enticements, oaths, tokens, and / all their engines of lust, are not the things they go under' (3.5.16-18). As Bertram sees it, Diana can be manipulated, used, and then discarded, with no thought for the consequences. She is precisely what Bertram needs in order to overcome his sexual qualms. Through the character of Diana, Shakespeare reveals what Bertram both fears and desires and makes clear through contrast what Helena lacks.

A number of critics have postulated that Bertram's anxieties over marriage with Helena have sexual origins.<sup>28</sup> Stanley Wells likens Bertram to Adonis, suggestively noting that 'here as in the poem [*Venus and Adonis*] the young man's resistance to the advances of a woman who is more sexually aware than himself hints at psychological reasons which may lie beyond his conscious understanding' (2010, 141). I suggest that these 'psychological reasons' Shakespeare found in the oral folktales, where the husbands' inner sexual anxieties are subtly implied. The dramatist merely brings them to the surface, and makes them more problematical.

Bullough characterised tale III.9 of the *Decameron* as a simple story 'describing what people did and said rather than analysing what they felt and thought' (1958, vol. II, 378). Shakespeare modifies his literary source by (re)introducing fairy tales. Perhaps influenced by the tales he heard orally, Shakespeare recognised the fairy-tale patterns within Boccaccio's story, and realised – despite Boccaccio's handling of them – that these stories mapped out compelling emotional situations. He brings these to the fore, emphasising and provoking the disquieting tensions present in the original tales but suppressed or excised by Boccaccio. In

the second half of the play, as we have seen, Shakespeare brings to the surface the latent sexual undercurrents contained in folktales of type 891 – suggested in narrative incidents such as the folktale husbands’ deserting their clever wives before sleeping with them – while Boccaccio removes any hint of such primitive motivations behind the storyline. As a result, Shakespeare magically transforms Boccaccio’s simple, child-like narrative ‘describing what people did and said’ into a rich drama of adult feelings and complicated ambiguities. The dramatist had an uncanny ability to draw out the human significance in any story, no matter how ostensibly trivial.

## 11. Conclusion

*All’s Well That Ends Well* is far from alone in the Shakespeare canon in its utilisation of disturbing material plundered from the dramatist’s childhood experience of folk- and fairy tales. Motifs like the ghost in *Hamlet* and the witches in *Macbeth* are other clear examples, while in plays like *Cymbeline*, *Measure for Measure*, *Pericles* and *King Lear*, the kinds of plots we encounter in orally transmitted stories lie close to the surface and add the kinds of disturbing qualities we find in *All’s Well*.

<sup>1</sup> Although in everyday usage folktales and fairy tales are often treated as two different kinds of stories, fairy tales form a subcategory of folktales, not a separate genre. In this essay, therefore, I will be treating folk- and fairy tales as two manifestations of the same well of oral sources. For a more in-depth explanation of the classification of folk narratives, see Ashliman 2004, 29-34. This article is an expanded and revised version of a paper discussed at the Ninth World Shakespeare Congress (Prague, 17-22 July 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Katharine Briggs’ renowned dictionary (1970), for instance, was published forty years ago – and it does not focus on fairy tales as *stories*, but is intended as a reference work. A book which focuses more on fairy tales as narratives, Stith Thompson’s *The Folktale* (1946), was published 66 years ago.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Anne Thompson, in her introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, asserts that critical discussion on the matter of sources for that play has been hampered by ‘the reluctance of literary scholars to deal with folktale and oral tradition’ (1984, 9).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Carter 1979. In this book, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Carter seizes on the suppressed psychological material in old fairy tales like ‘Bluebeard’, ‘Puss in Boots’ and ‘Little Red Ridinghood’, and uses it to create new, subversive, and unsettling stories, often overtly sexual and violent.

<sup>5</sup> Gillespie and Rhodes 2006, 1. Disney has even gone so far as to copyright these stories!

<sup>6</sup> For a good psychological approach to fairy tales see von Franz 1996.

<sup>7</sup> All Shakespeare quotations are taken from Greenblatt *et al.*, eds, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> The label was coined in 1896 by F. S. Boas for plays that posed particular social and psychological problems which required unusual and often unsatisfying solutions. He applied the term to *Troilus and Cressida*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Hamlet* (Snyder, ed., 1993, 16).

<sup>9</sup> See Waller 2007 for a collection of essays on the play which are much more optimistic in spirit.

<sup>10</sup> See Price 1968 to get a sense of the critical dissatisfaction with *All's Well* (especially with Bertram's callowness, Helena's deception, and the so-called reconciliation).

<sup>11</sup> Boccaccio was not alone in borrowing folktale plots: Giambattista Basile, Giovanni Francesco Straparola, and Geoffrey Chaucer all regularly incorporated popular folktales into their work (Ashliman 2004, 22-23, 153). Shakespeare was not doing anything new, then, in using folktales in his plays, he was merely continuing an old and fruitful narrative tradition.

<sup>12</sup> Uther 2004, part 1, 174 and 516. The ATU number attributed to a folktale refers to its classification as a certain 'type'. A 'type' is a term used by folklorists to describe a basic plotline or sequence of events. Stories with the same basic plotlines are grouped together as one type, having one ATU number. Aarne and Thompson first catalogued folktales in this manner, and Uther later updated the catalogue, hence the label 'ATU'.

<sup>13</sup> *The National Theatre Live* (2009), <<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=52899>>, accessed 15 Nov 2009.

<sup>14</sup> As a result, Lawrence oversimplifies things which are actually quite complicated – like the moral status of Helena. Where Lawrence sees Helena's tricking Bertram into bed as a completely acceptable convention of storytelling, for instance, other critics deem her behaviour as tantamount to rape. See, for instance, Wells 2010, 122.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Hunter 1959, 1, who says that the main issue with the plays seems to be 'the specific problem of reconciling a simple magical heroine derived from the source with a realistic background'. Hunter seems intent on showing that much of the play runs against the folk-narrative effects that Lawrence perceived. Snyder puts it as a 'dramatic clash between romantic wish-fulfilment and brutal social fact' (1993, 8).

<sup>16</sup> Tales of this type are both very old and very popular. Not only Boccaccio, but Straparola (*Le Piacevoli notti*) and Basile (*Pentamerone*), as well as a number of early fabliaux and jestbooks, all make use of type 891. In addition, the type has an oral tradition which goes back at least as far as the eleventh century, the date of *The Kathā sarit sāgara; or, Ocean of the streams of story*, an Indian collection of folktales. It is likely, in this case, that Shakespeare was familiar with stories of type 891 in some form other than Boccaccio's. This is especially plausible if we consider that Shakespeare used the bedtrick, which lies at the heart of every type 891 story, in another of his plays, *Measure for Measure*. According to Stith Thompson, tales which turn on seduction and adultery, 'deceptions connected with sex-conduct', were high favourites in the Middle Ages, among both oral and literary storytellers (1946, 202-203).

<sup>17</sup> My summary, from Bushnaq, ed., 1986, 339-343.

<sup>18</sup> My summary, from Bracciolini 1928, no. 116, 143.

<sup>19</sup> In an Indian tale entitled *The Clever Wife*, for instance, the wife disguises herself as a cowherd's daughter in order to sleep with her husband (Stokes 1880, tale XXVIII, 216).

<sup>20</sup> Sometimes the wives are simply stated as being clever, as in *The Clever Wife*, referred to above. Often, though, they actively display their cleverness: in a Turkish story, a Vizier's daughter is very good at answering and posing riddles (Lawrence 1922, 429).

<sup>21</sup> This seems especially true if we consider that the folktale men generally marry their wives willingly. They don't flee, in other words, out of hatred for their brides. Evidently, as new and probably nervous husbands, they fear what marriage entails: sex. In part, these are tales of sexual maturation; they trace the husband's budding awareness of his sexuality and his relationship to the opposite sex.

<sup>22</sup> In the Turkish story mentioned above, once the prince has married the Vizier's clever daughter, he leaves immediately to go hunting, where he remains for nine years (Lawrence 1922, 429).

<sup>23</sup> Although Beltramo also does not sleep with Giletta before fleeing, the implication is that he does so because the marriage will then be open for annulment; there is no suggestion that he *fears* sleeping with Giletta.

<sup>24</sup> Shakespeare picks up on the fact that the folktale husbands fear female sexuality, and he dramatises and builds on this by making Helena intensely sexual.

<sup>25</sup> See also 4.4.21-26, where she reflects on her night in bed with Bertram, his 'sweet use' of her, how 'lust doth play', and her sense of defilement.

<sup>26</sup> This makes Helena's rejection much more heart-wrenching; Bertram rejects *her*, as a person, rather than her status. It is with small changes like this that Shakespeare draws out the human meaning behind the story.

<sup>27</sup> This theme seems to have been a favourite of Shakespeare's. He first explores it in *Venus and Adonis*, which deals with a male's fear of a predatory female. Adonis is not interested in sexually voracious Venus, and all he wants to do is go hunting. This is echoed in *All's Well*, written after that poem, which recounts Bertram's fear of lustful Helena. Like Adonis, all Bertram wants to do is go engage in a manly activity (in this case, war). Shakespeare picks up the theme once more in *I Henry IV*, with the battle-hungry Hotspur. Hotspur's wife complains that all her husband wants to do is fight in war, depriving her of her wifely rights: 'O, my good lord, why are you thus alone? / For what offence have I this fortnight been / A banished woman from my Harry's bed?' (2.4.31-33).

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Snyder, ed., 1993, 11; Neely 1985, 71; McCandless 1994, 456-457. While critics have identified Bertram's sexual anxieties, what has not been said is where Shakespeare got the idea for these psychological tensions: folktales.

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