Oxfordian Fingerprints in *All’s Well That End’s Well*

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Honors Thesis  
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Though Shakespeare's body of writing is widely familiar and fanatically studied, its author remains veiled in a shadow of suspicion. The conventional biography of Shakespeare credits William of Stratford with the canon, yet there is an alarmingly feeble body of evidence to support his authorship. From the mists of doubt, many candidates for "Shakespeare" have emerged. The most compelling of these is Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, whose position, education, travel experiences and life legacy coincide beautifully with the profile of the Shakespearen author. Most significantly, though, de Vere's personal circumstances, unique knowledge and historically documented experiences emerge with staggering consistency within the literature, itself.

Since the identification of de Vere as Shakespeare, Oxfordian scholars have mined the canon, cataloguing and analyzing each possible connection that endorses his authorship. Though exhaustive, this effort has neglected a few of Shakespeare's less-popular plays. Among this latter group, *All's Well That Ends Well* has remained perched on the margins of Oxfordian scholarship. Therefore, in this thesis effort I strive to explore how this play reveals Edward de Vere as "Shakespeare," and illuminate the significance of this connection to the greater value of the canon.

Embarking on this study, I was driven primarily by conventional modes of literary research. This is to say, I read abundantly: biographies of de Vere, original essays claiming Oxford's authorship, diverse commentaries, and most importantly – the play itself. Through several meticulous readings of *All's Well* – consistently documenting moments of Oxfordian connection revealed by the historical record – I unearthed sufficient evidence to mount a case for de Vere's authorship, using this play as a lens.
The parallels between Oxford’s life and the plot of All’s Well are uncanny, though many are circumstantial. My focus, then, was on aligning specific narrative detail in this play, with the documented, unique and intimate details we have about de Vere’s life experiences.

The result of my endeavor is an original perspective within an old discourse, on an even older story. Foremost among the plethora of Oxfordian connections I identified in the play, is the author’s allegorizing his own tempestuous marriage. The circumstances of de Vere’s betrothal to Anne Cecil – and subsequent disharmony – are reflected clearly and predominantly in this tale. By appraising the play’s overall narrative progression through the Oxfordian lens, the fog that has surrounded this Shakespearean work begins to evaporate. It seems that this play represents Oxford’s complex and somewhat dichotomous reflection on his relationship with Anne. Clearly, he regrets the mistreatment of her during his brash youth. Yet, there is a subtle and cynical voice resonant in this play’s conclusion, one which seeks to expose the absurdity of traditional love story resolution. This voice forces the fairytale mold to live in the real world of ambivalent commitment, emotional coldness and the ultimate irresolution of life.

Yet, does the identity and biography of the Shakespearean author really affect the significance of his work and our ability to enjoy the stories? All writers draw from real life experience to inform and color their stories. To understand the personalities behind the experiences is to acquaint oneself with the proper tone for those stories. Not only does biographical insight flesh out narrative meaning, then, but it enriches the very relevance of the stories, as pertinent to the human struggle of which we are a part.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1564 a man was born to a humble estate in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, who would dramatically change the world. Approximately twenty years later, this fellow relocated to London, where he could indulge his love of theater. He went on to achieve enormous success and fame as an actor and playwright, eventually writing thirty-seven plays, one hundred and fifty-four sonnets, and two epic poems that would become the most heralded literature in the English language.

This once-upon-a-time account is the conventional biography of William Shakespeare, greatest literary mind of the western world. Performed and lauded now for four centuries, the plays of Shakespeare have seeped into every pore of both academic and pop culture. From 9th grade giggling through Romeo & Juliet's balcony scene, to inspirational phrases such as “to thine own self be true” decontextualized and printed on teabags, it seems the Bard is fully embraced as our hero of words. Yet, along the way – amidst the sea of devoted Shakespearean scholarship – doubts emerged: many could sense something rotten in the state of Shakespeare. Indeed, a fog of uncertainty/mystery hovered over the canon, catching the conscience of more than just those marginalized by serious academia, that easily dismissed an inevitable crowd of wild accusers.

In 1888 celebrated poet Walt Whitman confided to a close friend: “it is my final belief that the Shakespearean plays were written by another hand than Shaksper’s” (Anderson xxvi). Sigmund Freud, grandfather of modern psychology, similarly concluded in a 1927 essay, “I no longer believe that William Shakespeare the actor from Stratford was the author of the works that have been ascribed to him” (Anderson xxv-xxvi). Novelist Henry James was “haunted by the conviction that the divine William is
the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world," as recorded in a 1903 letter (Anderson xxxv). The voices of the skeptics grew louder. Mark Twain devoted a thirteen-chapter essay in 1909, *Is Shakespeare Dead*, concerning the enigma, which defrocked the textbook biography of the Bard with Twainesque stings of precision and irreverence. What sort of troublesome data or rumors could possibly spawn such gravity of suspicion?

The dearth of real evidence for the Stratford man’s authorship is the compelling phenomenon. Unfortunately original play scripts for Shakespearean works don’t exist. Therefore other lifetime writings of the purported author should serve as the logical bridge to the posthumously published First Folio. However, we have no record of any personal correspondences from Will Shaksper (as he spelled it), no drafts, manuscripts or journals issued from his pen. In short, we have nothing from the Shakespearean era written by Stratford, save six quavering signatures, all on legal documents, the final three scrawled on his last will and testament. This document details bequeathings of even the most obscure of the actor’s possessions – down to his favorite bowl. Yet there is nary a mention of any plays or literary achievements, which among the possessions of a devoted writer would be held most dear. During an era with no public libraries in England, books were a treasure of the intellectually curious, who also had to be of substantial wealth. Indeed, the private libraries of the literarily accomplished are today museums of the closely guarded gems of Elizabethan England’s aristocrats. While scholars concur on the profound impact that the classics of antiquity had on Shakespeare’s canon, there is no record of William of Stratford ever even owning a book. In reality – so far as can be proven – Shaksper may never have penned a whole sentence. Shakespeare’s scholastic
disciples have chronicled the canon's attesting to its author's exhaustive education and extensive travel. Alarmingly, there is no record of this Stratford actor ever leaving England or even attending school. The list of inconsistencies is long and this paper will not delve into each – lest another volume on this matter be produced. After his pilgrimage in 1786 to the shrine that Stratford-upon-Avon became, founding father John Adams put it succinctly: "There is nothing preserved of this great genius worth knowing. Nothing which might inform us what education, what company, what accident turned his mind to letters and the drama" (Anderson xxvi).

It seemed that the shadow of another man darkened the Shakespeare canon. The great literary manhunt that ensued reads like an adventure of Sherlock Holmes. Then, beginning with a list of qualities required for the Bard, British scholar J. Thomas Looney shocked the literary world with his 1920 expose, "Shakespeare" Identified in Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford. Tracing each known step of this Elizabethan nobleman, Looney unmasked a man of astounding legacy. Surviving records closely document the Earl of Oxford's unparalleled education (two University degrees before age 20, private tutoring by Arthur Golding, translator of Ovid's Metamorphoses into English), extensive travel (spent close to two years touring Europe's finest cities and backwaters alike, intimate familiarity particularly with Italy – significant given the settings of most plays), and uncommon access to Elizabeth's court (Lord Great Chamberlain of England, favorite courtier to the Queen). Certainly, de Vere was recognized as one of the finest minds of his generation by his contemporaries (Anderson 306-307). Though more than a dozen of his adolescent poems are preserved (ringing with an uncanny, albeit immature, Shakespearean tone), the fact that no theatrical product exists from the mature years of
this foremost of England’s figures prompts a whisper of conspiracy too substantive to
dismiss. Undeniably the authorship question hums with an undercurrent of subterfuge
which has clouded conventional scholarship. Though the trail of these devious
interferences with historical record has been rigorously tracked, the map is too intricate to
detail here. Instead, I offer a singularly intriguing morsel connecting de Vere to the
Shakespeare pen name. During a lecture in 1578, Cambridge professor Gabriel Harvey
praised the young Earl: “thine eyes flash fire, thy countenance shakes spears (Anderson
139 emphasis added). As Orson Welles said in 1954, “I think [the earl of] Oxford wrote
Shakespeare. If you don’t, there are some awful funny coincidences to explain away”
(Anderson xxviii).

Among that which is documented, de Vere was a voracious reader, active courtier,
poet, playwright and patron of the theater, versed in theology, law, horticulture,
cosmography, military tactics, music, and fluent in Latin and French with a grasp of
several other languages. The spectrum of knowledge and intimacy with the royal court’s
innerworkings represented in Shakespeare’s work is staggering. Unequivocally, the
Shakespearean author was a man of profound genius and exceptional position. In the 17th
Earl of Oxford, we seem to have a match. But how can one be sure of Oxford’s or any
other candidate’s claim? Stacking a man’s resume against the virtues and erudition
exhibited in a body of literature is scarcely grounds to dub him with the title of
“Shakespeare.” What, then, is the most reliable stage upon which this de Vere can be
tested? The logical proving grounds, of course, are the very pages in which Hamlet
laments, Cleopatra swoons and Macbeth rages – the material that makes us even care that
there was a William Shakespeare who wrote plays in the late 16th century. For even
though it seems that these stories gave birth to the Shakespeare of the modern
consciousness, four hundred years ago there was a vibrant, unequalled yet knowable soul
in whom the tales were born. Thus, the miles of lines and stanzas of the Shakespearean
corpus have been mined with an Oxfordian headlamp – yielding terrifying success.
Through this Oxfordian lens we find Shakespeare to be one of the most
autobiographically driven writers ever to have embraced the pen. With each new
illumination of Oxford’s fingerprints on the plays and poetry, we grow wealthier in an
understanding of our most cherished storyteller and in appreciation for the humanity in
his tales.

This mountainous mining of Shakespeare’s identity encompasses the vast scope
of the Bard’s writing, amounting to a discourse that is – in breadth alone – overwhelming.
At least a few library shelves are now filled with Oxfordian readings of Shakespeare’s
crowning works, thoroughly and diligently connecting de Vere to the Shakespeare
achievement through astonishing parallels of detail found in the plays to his life. Yet the
play All’s Well that Ends Well sits somewhat uncomfortably on the periphery of this
cavation. Despite a strong showing of biographical allusions, All’s Well is somewhat
ignored in the primary thrust of Oxfordian scholarship. This, I believe, is largely due to
the fact that it is not regarded as one of Shakespeare’s best works. In Shakespeare: The
Invention of the Human, celebrated scholar Harold Bloom segregates All’s Well That
Ends Well under the “Problem Plays” category in his table of contents. Concerning this
unceremonious designation, Shakespeare critic Stanley Wells rationalizes that “there is a
conscious intellectuality about this play which may help to explain its relative lack of
popularity” (Wells 234). In spite of its peculiarities, an aloof significance resonates
throughout the pages of this play. Therefore, within a field saturated by decades of
fanatical scholarship – endlessly probing the Hamlets and Lear’s – I deemed it a noble
challenge to explore this less-favored play. I hope to offer to the Oxford cause a
wholesale investigation of the orphaned All’s Well, unprecedented in its exhaustiveness
and original in both narrative and biographical interpretation. Thus, this thesis effort
pivots on the following question: how does All’s Well that Ends Well reveal Oxfordian
authorship, and why is this connection pertinent to the value of the canon? Implicit in
this inquiry is also the question of how the Oxfordian connection deepens insight into this
play, alone, as a text.

NOTE ON NAMES
Members of the old aristocracy of England seem to have had an affinity for concealing
their identities behind poesies and pseudonyms. Therefore, a note of clarity is needed
regarding several of the interchangeable titles to be used in reference to this paper’s key
players. As this thesis advocates for Edward de Vere as the true Shakespearean author,
the reader should understand that the author’s use of “Shake-Speare” = Edward de Vere,
and will thus be used in general reference to the author of the plays. Original records of
the signatures on the plays contain the hyphen, so I will use this form to delineate Oxford
as “Shakespeare.” Any reference to William of Stratford will be delineated “Shaksper,”
as it was spelled historically, or simply “Stratford.” Furthermore, our target Shake-speare
will alternatively be referred to as “Lord Oxford,” “de Vere,” “the 17th Earl,” simply
“Oxford,” etc. – as he was in English society. The master of de Vere’s wardship and later
father-in-law, William Cecil will generally be referred to by his courtly title of “Lord
Burghley" or simply "Burghley" – in order to avoid confusion with his son, Robert Cecil.

For all other players I will stick to one title, and its variations, which are easily recognizable.

**METHODOLOGY**

After taking one of WSU’s Shakespeare classes (Engl. 306) from a renowned Shakespearean heretic, I was forever ensnared by Oxfordian scholarship. Within this course, I wrote variously on Oxfordian connections in *Hamlet, Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*. Exorcising the Stratfordian demons in these plays, I found it a thrilling revelation to study the earl’s life and identify the fragmented pieces of himself that de Vere wove into his characters. Though the aforementioned plays yielded spellbinding autobiographical allusions to the complex life of Oxford, I was simultaneously dismayed and encouraged to see that many scholars had already dissected them most thoroughly for Oxfordian fingerprints. Arriving at *All’s Well that Ends Well* as sufficiently uncharted territory, I began at Shakespeare ground zero: repeated readings. Launching into an excruciatingly close reading of the text, I combed specifically for any details aligned with Lord Oxford’s life in order to 1) bolster the case for his authorship 2) gain insight into the Bard’s person and life and 3) deepen my understanding of the play’s thematic subtleties.

After reading the *All’s Well* through several times (Shakespeare isn’t light reading!), I identified several launching points – intersections of play circumstance and details I already knew about de Vere’s life – in order to validate furthering my endeavor. Yet to form a complete picture of the play’s allegorical/autobiographical content, I needed to become more exhaustively acquainted with all available information on this
man. I found several biographical resources that filled in the gaps in my de Vere knowledge base. While a glossing over of the original Oxford as Shakespeare interpretation, Looney’s *Shakespeare Identified*, proved an appropriate foundation, the work reflected the least current developments of the discourse. The information in Dorothy and Charlton Ogburn’s *This Star of England* is an exhaustive portrait of de Vere’s reflection in the canon. While the Ogburn book sags with several unbending assertions about unavoidably flexible interpretations of historical issues, it provided a wealth of reflection on firsthand accounts of de Vere’s life and specifically relationships. In addition, this work offered some cunning insight into Oxford’s probable source material for *All’s Well*. The Ogburns also speculated admirably on possible self-exposing moments of cryptic riddling embedded in many of Shakespeare’s plays, including the one currently under the microscope. Eva Clark’s *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare’s Plays*, another cornerstone of Oxfordianism, strengthened my grasp on the substantiation of earlier composition dates for the plays than those traditionally accepted. Furthermore, Clark’s section on *All’s Well that Ends Well* spurred me to unconventional thinking about the reasoning behind Shakespeare’s twistings of the play’s primary source, the *Decameron*. Two of the latest Oxfordian arguments, Mark Anderson’s “*Shakespeare*” by *Another Name* and William Farina’s *De Vere as Shakespeare*, offered immensely meticulous navigations through all surviving records of the de Vere legacy. Anderson’s work, in particular, is ripe with painstaking documentation of de Vere’s social involvement/place and personal journey – highlighting at each turn the consequent echoes found in the plays and poetry. This book helped to color my notions of the extent to which Oxford’s life experiences not only inform the canon but appear in its tales and
characters. Finally, Anne Barton’s essay on All’s Well, which prefaces the play in the Riverside anthology, sparked my questioning of the narrative form and rhetorical structures within the story. Fortunately, Barton’s objectivity informed my understanding of play’s ultimate message – which was only palatable through the Oxfordian lens.

These works provided me with the critical framework for my endeavor into this corner of the Oxfordian discourse and served as references throughout. Then began the feverish process of oscillating between the primary source material, de Vere biographies, notes on this play from Oxfordian scholars and notes generated for intertextual explanations of the play. Though my methods for this thesis were directed by the conventional standards for scholarship in the field, my foremost anchor was the original text, which I scrutinized substantially before allowing any voices of criticism to join my investigation. For the most part, I attended only the most celebrated scholars general interpretative commentaries on this play (e.g. Bloom, Wells, Goddard) to avoid overly arcane interference with my own perceptions of the work’s internal (and therefore external) meanings, while not neglecting the orthodox views of the play.

Through the above process, my study matured. Subordinating the mere alignment of details from the play and man (though this comprises the first phase of my thesis question), I was eventually prompted to delve into the ‘whys’ of this biographical-textual relationship. As will soon be discussed, I was elated to discover what this question of purpose availed about both story and author. Concerning the structure of my primary argument, the plot and narrative development of All’s Well will be analyzed for internal significances of story and character development. Within this intertextual analysis, corresponding details from de Vere’s life will be rigorously explored, aligning the man
with his work. Ultimately, the discussion will transition to an exposition of this play's overarching message and the author's underlying purpose, as informed by Oxfordian authorship.

SOURCES: THE BASIS FOR ALL'S WELL

In brief, All's Well that Ends Well is the story of a young count of France, Bertram, who becomes a ward of the crown after his father's death and heads off to Paris. Childhood friend Helen follows him with romantic intent and wins marriage rights after curing the sick King. Bertram opposes the match and sneaks to the Italian wars. Helen again pursues him and eventually corners and tricks Bertram into honoring their union. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare's primary source for this play is a Boccaccio tale, "Giletta of Narbona," from the ninth story of the third day of the Decameron. The key plotlines of Shakespeare's version are mostly identical to its Italian source. Boccaccio tells also of fatherless count, Beltramo, who rebuffs Giletta, heads to Italy's battlefield, is bed-tricked by Gilleta and forced by his own terms to accept her. Shakespeare follows the mold of familiar folk motifs in the Decameron: a rejected wife goes to extraordinary lengths to win back her husband, seemingly magical emergence of a 'cure' solution, virginity's association with supernatural power, an exchange of rings, the bed trick, etc. (Barton 533). Despite the strong parallel between the two stories, Shakespeare does depart from Boccaccio in some subtle yet crucial moments. Crucially, the biography of Edward de Vere reveals uncanny circumstantial similarity to the plot of Boccaccio's Giletta, particularly in regard to the figure of an abandoned wife. These connective details will be examined thoroughly in the following pages, but it can be surmised that de Vere was
drawn to the Italian tale in large part due to its narrative similarity to his own experiences. Certainly, the Shakespearean author must have had access to Boccaccio’s classic, which — given the restricted circulation of literary books in Elizabethan England — is no small factor. Significantly, the library of de Vere’s adolescent guardian, Lord Burghley, contained a copy of the *Decameron* in the original Italian, a language in which we know Oxford to have been fluent (Farina 78).

Furthermore, some alterations in the Shakespeare play were informed by the life of Helena de Toumon. In Oxford’s years the French Countess of Rousillon had a daughter named Helena, who endured a romantic rejection of her own (Clark 121). Coincidentally, Bertram mother in *All’s Well* is also the Countess of Rousillon. This connection is enabled by evidence we have of the Earl of Oxford’s encounter with the historical Countess, as he likely stayed in one of her family chateaus during his travel through that part of France (Anderson 108). Therefore, mapping the events in de Vere’s life that are reflected in this play one might conclude that *All’s Well*’s dramatic framework represents a convergence of three sources: Boccaccio’s tale spliced with details from the life of Helena de Toumon and the experiences of the Earl of Oxford.

**ANALYSIS & CONNECTIONS: ACTS I & II**

This play opens with the Countess of Rosillion lamenting the death of her husband and the inevitable departure of her son, Bertram, the new count. Bertram joins in the groaning, because he is now obligated to leave for Paris, as a ward of the crown “evermore in subjection” (1.1.5). In sixteenth-century England, once a young noble inherited a title due to the loss of his father he became a ward of the monarch’s court.
This was commanded of him, and the young gentleman would be placed under the guardianship of either the highest bidder or, if his station was high enough, in the care of someone serving directly under the Queen. Appropriately, the beginning of Edward de Vere’s story is identical to that of All’s Well that Ends Well. In 1562 John de Vere 16th Earl of Oxford died, and twelve year old Edward inherited the earldom and immediately became Elizabeth’s ward (Anderson 16). For the rest of his years as a minor de Vere would be in the charge of the Master of the Court of Wards, who at this time happened to be William Cecil, a man of common birth, yet preeminent at court as Elizabeth’s long trusted chief advisor and spymaster. Despite the enormous privilege of his high birth, young Lord Oxford’s fate (specifically marriage) was at Cecil’s command (Ogburn 164). The relationship between Oxford and Cecil was complex and often strained. The consequences of Cecil’s style of guidance would shape the development of de Vere’s attitudes and choices immensely, particularly those involving Cecil’s matchmaking – the terms of which will soon appear in our play. Bertram then, whose French title of Count is equivalent to an English earl, appears to be Shake-spear’s autobiographical representation of his youthful self – the young Lord Oxford (Whalen 105).

Obliquely inserted into All’s Well’s opening scene is a discussion of the French King’s woeful health. Apparently he suffers from a “fistula,” or ulcer, from which he can find no respite: “He hath abandoned his physicians” (I.i.13). Several transcripts of personal correspondences from London in the late 1560’s and early 1570’s report Queen Elizabeth’s suffering from “the closing of a fistula.” Elizabeth, in a role counterpart to All’s Well’s King, was similarly discouraged by the endurance of the malady as it persisted for years (Ogburn 164). As with all matters potentially weakening the Queen’s
public perception, this information would have been guarded. The Shakespearean author would have to have been in a position of uncommon access to dirty-laundry court developments in order to include this reference in a story. It is unlikely that a common actor from Stratford, with no known direct relationship with Elizabeth would have been privy to her embarrassing condition. However, as a favorite courtier to the Queen, consistently plugged-in to the closest circle of the court, de Vere was positioned to know the situation and include it in one of his plays. Furthermore, the timing of the Queen’s illness coincides with the period of de Vere’s life allegorized in *All’s Well* – his marriage to Anne Cecil.

Within this opening scene, we also meet Lafew and Helen. Lafew, an old Lord of Rosillion is a wise and kind figure, but one who is given to verbose strings of advice, often prefacing important discussions with distinct windiness: “he his special nothing ever prologues” (II.i.92). In this vein he sometimes resembles Hamlet’s Polonius, who is irrefutably a parody of William Cecil, Lord Burghley (even the Stratford camp agrees on this). Yet, in Lafew we get the softer side of Burghley. Oxford was not always at odds with Burghley, and we have records of many warm, at least superficially, correspondences between the two. Helen’s appearance, though, marks the emergence of the pivotal allegorical figure of *All’s Well that Ends Well*. She is Anne Cecil, first wife of Edward de Vere. The parallels begin with Helen’s standing as a household companion of Bertram and blossom through the unusual circumstances of their marriage. Daughter of a famed doctor, Helen is adopted by the Countess upon his death and grows up in the noble family alongside Bertram, who later complains, “she had her breeding at my father’s charge” (II.iii.113). Though an embraced part of the home, her living situation cannot
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wing” (I.i.203-204). Lafew, upon discovering Parolles’ true nature, accosts the knave with a litany of verbal abuses, addressing everything from his kleptomania to his pretentious appearance (II.iii.249-251, 258-259). Like all but one of the play’s participants, scholars regard Parolles – “the spineless creature whose aim in life is to wear what is being worn, to say what is being said, and to do what is being done … to be a fashionmonger, in other words, a parrot, a parasite, a flatterer, an echo, a copy-cat, a so-say-I, a fool of time” – with unwavering disdain (Goddard 44). Yet, inexplicably in his confidence, Parolles plays fiddler to Bertram’s rebellious potential: “In a word, just as his soul was about to be born, his bad angel, Parolles, took possession of him” (Goddard 39).

Bertram and his companion Parolles arrive at the King’s court in Paris, where the ailing monarch welcomes the count with a grandiose tribute to his late father. A portion of the king’s gushing:

So like a courtier, contempt nor bitterness Were in his pride or sharpness; if they were, His equal had awak’d them, and his honor, Clock to itself, knew the true minute when Exception bid him speak, and at this time His tongue obey’d his hand.
(I.ii.36-41)

Bertram, like Oxford, is immediately cast into his father’s shadow, and though he echoes the king’s reverence, “His good remembrance, sir, / Lies richer in your thoughts than on his tomb,” one can detect a veiled tone of sarcasm, or at least eye-rolling exaggeration in his response (I.ii.48-49). This was a situation all too familiar to de Vere, especially as a young man with the echoes of his father’s footsteps still resounding in the background. Losing his father at such a young age, it is natural “that the figure of a hero-father would
live in his imagination and memory” (Looney 192). Yet with a legacy to follow of such flawless façade, de Vere certainly felt the pressure live up to his father’s reputation. As the countess admonishes Bertram to “succeed thy father / in manners as in shape,” so Oxford must have constantly been reminded of his father’s greatness and his being measured against it (I.i.61-62).

In this regard, the most glaring source of inferiority that de Vere felt is mirrored in Bertram’s longing for military service and ultimately, glory. Yet Bertram is restrained by the King from entering into the Florentine-Senoy fray. Bemoaning the basis of the restriction on him, Bertram mocks, “I am commanded here, and kept a coil with, / ‘Too young’ and ‘the next year’ and ‘tis too early.’ / ...I shall stay here the forehorse to a smock, / Creaking my shoes on plain masonry” (II.i.27-28,30-31). Here ‘forehorse’ is used as “something over-decorated and hung with favours” (Clark 117). Oxford, like Bertram, resented the overprotection his noble position guaranteed him, as his thirst for excitement through travel and military conquest is well documented. He once wrote to Burghley: “For having made an end to all hope to help myself by Her Majesty’s service—considering that my youth is objected unto me...” (Ogburn 164). In 1570, less than a year before his marriage— as is the timing in All’s Well— de Vere wrote that he was eager to “see the wars and services in strange and foreign places” (Anderson 41).

Consequently, despite the Queen’s standing order, the brash earl snuck off in April of 1570, joining the earl of Sussex in a campaign to suppress outbreaks of rebellion in England’s bordering countries (Anderson x). Evidence of his enlistment’s clandestine nature exists in one report which stated that “it was said that [de Vere] was flying, and that the Earl of Southampton had fled...” (Clark 117). Reflecting the choice of his model,
and upon the advice of Parolles, Bertram decides to disobey the king and “steal away / bravely” (II.i.29). Thus far, it seems that this play speaks of young Oxford’s quest to win manhood and independence first (earning his name) before sinking into a courtly role – one which he would be rolled into, like a child led by protective measures of parental authority along the path they choose, not that chosen by him. At the very least, the plot of All’s Well attests to de Vere’s propensity for bucking the system and getting away with it – mostly.

Yet before Bertram rides into free air, he is summoned to the court for what proves to be a startling, though temporary, hijack of his recent designs. In one of the mores crucial and biographically telling sections of the play, Helen is rewarded for curing the king of his fistula (no explanation is given as to how she manages this – save her use of “daddy’s secret potion”) with the royal offer of any husband she chooses. The most eligible bachelors of Paris are lined up for Helen’s perusal, and she graciously passes each one up with a variety self-effacing explanations: “you are too young, too happy, and too good, / To make yourself a son out of my blood” (II.iii. 96-97). Though the bachelors’ replies to Helen are flattering in terms of objective language, their tone and body language, revealing distain, are betrayed in the commentary on the spectacle onlooker Lafew offers under his breath. The old lord mutters, after bachelor #2’s ostensibly complimentary requite, “Do all they deny her? And they were sons of / mine I’d have them whipt, or I would send them to / th’ Turk to make eunuchs of” (II.iii.86-88). Though Lafew is not Helen’s father in the play, he adopts the paternal voice of Burghley in this and later scenes. He seems to bristle in general about the meat market atmosphere in which Helen is participating. Adopting the typical fatherly posture that no man is good
enough for a cherished daughter, Lafew surveys the prospective husbands and quips about the cumulative “little beard” amongst them (II.iii.61). Perhaps through this posture of Lafew, de Vere is paying respect to Burghley’s genuine concern over Anne’s honor and assurance of her loveliness. On the other hand, through this portrayal, Oxford might be theatrically modeling the attitude he felt Lord Burghley should have maintained about his daughter (rather than selfishly targeting a stature-raising suitor like the earl).

Regardless, Helen remains graceful and thick-skinned during the selection process, impervious because of sights firmly fixed on Bertram.

She is shaken, however, when she indicates Bertram as her choice and he responds with outrage: “But never hope to know why I should marry her...Disdain / Rather corrupt me ever!” (II.iii.110, 115). The count proceeds to lambaste her low stature and condescending familiarity, “I know her well; / She had her breeding at my father’s charge - / A poor physician’s daughter my wife” (II.iii.113-115)! Here, Bertram is not only dismissive of Helen based on a sense of social mismatch, he is downright harsh – demeaning her advances as detestable and her person as revolting. There is no fiber of grace in Bertram’s rejection of this woman. Instead, he is arrogant and mean. The king quickly offers to officially raise Helen’s stature: “’Tis only title thou disdain’st in her, the / which I can build up,” then launches into a lecture about the true derivation of honor: “Honors thrive, / When rather from our acts we them derive / Than our foregoers” (II.iii.117-118, 135-137). Still, Bertram balks, and the king rebukes him as a “Proud scornful boy, unworthy this good gift,” and swears to cast him from good grace into the path of his mighty and hateful wrath (II.iii.151). Bertram’s subsequent recantation is pure lip service, and his one-eighthy attitude adjustment following the severe
threat can only be seen as comically sarcastic – the furthest thing from sincere agreement. A few minutes later, hidden in the company of Parolles, Bertram’s revolt peaks, “I’ll to the Tuscan wars, and never bed her” (II.iii.273).

Elements of this wedding circumstance are unmistakably extracted from the pages of Edward de Vere’s own marital debacle with Anne Cecil. Lord Burghley spearheaded the match of his daughter with de Vere. This heaped political pressure on the earl (represented in that of the king to Bertram), due to Lord Burghley’s influence as Master of Wards and as one of Elizabeth’s chief operatives and advisors. Perhaps the Queen sensed a benefit in the union herself, yet the impact of Burghley persuasion and manipulation speaks louder. Resonant in the promise of All’s Well’s king is the action taken by Elizabeth in raising the Cecil status to nobility (Burghley became Baron) immediately before the wedding was to take place (Whalen 105, Clark 115). Oxford’s reluctance to take Anne’s hand is proven by his subsequent actions (like Bertram he “escaped” to the continent), and the sour overall development of their relationship (Clark 117). Bertram’s final arrow, the refusal to consummate, reflects the very commitment Oxford later made to abstain from the marriage bed with Anne (Ogburn 81).

All’s Well’s rendering of the de Vere-Cecil wedding fiasco can be interpreted in two ways.

1.) The superficially obvious reading:

The despicable quality of Bertram’s reaction to Helen is offered by Shake-speare as a mea culpa for his early attitude towards Anne. Oxford recognizes in penning this play that he, like Bertram, overreacted to the turn of events with unforgivable insensitivity. Bertram/Oxford transposed his general discontent at home – as a doted
upon and yet unleashed adolescent male in a house of women and stuffy lords – to anyone perpetuating those circumstances, even passively. This discontent was channeled most directly to Helen/Anne through snorting rejection. Through this interpretive lens we understand the noble picture of Helen/Anne the play paints, as well as the blemished self-portrait Oxford puts on display. Following this pattern we recognize that the Countess, Lafew, Parolles and Lavatch all function in the play to raise opinion of Helen, while exposing Bertram’s undesirable qualities. The narrative foundation of this self-representation can be seen in Act I, where Bertram has but a mere ten bursts of dialogue – all diplomatic pleasantries and simple responses. This is a far cry form the deep gaze into heart and mind that we get from other autobiographical protagonists of the Bard’s.

Really, this play is not meant to explain Bertram’s feelings or experiences from his own perspective. In fact, Bertram plays a flimsy soul in All’s Well – standing and responding on cue – ever played by the guilesome likes of Parolles. Rather, this play functions as an effectively un-ornate apology to Anne, with an empathetic glimpse into her experience.

2.) The other reading:

While still acknowledging his youthful insensitivity, Oxford – through Bertram’s unapologetic attitude – is substantiating his feelings about the marriage circumstance with a naked animation of his primal, emotional reaction. In his answer to Helen, Bertram looks bad, but objectively – despite Helen’s honorable nature and earnest devotion – this young man has been forced into a marriage both untimely and to a childhood friend of no romantic import, a sisterly figure. Perhaps in his appraisal of Anne Cecil as a spouse, the sibling-like aspect of their acquaintance disturbed de Vere. Indeed, this foster sister to whom Oxford was to be wed was barely fifteen years old at
the time of their marriage in 1571. The Act I interaction between the Countess and Helen serves as an awkward exposure of the sibling dynamic. In this scene, with Countess serving as the metaphor for maternal concern, de Vere is wrestling with his discomfort over the way he'd perceived Anne over the years – a slightly annoying little sister. As Oxford was socially cornered into this nuptial, it seems rational to also simplify the situation: he just never possessed a romantic affection for Anne. Maybe he never even really liked her! Upon this scale for the play, we hear the raw voice of de Vere’s frustration in Bertram’s specific protests: “In such a business, give me leave to use / The help of mine own eyes,” for “Wars is no strife / To the dark house and the detested wife” (II.iii.107-108, 291-292). While the self-portrayal remains unflattering, perhaps this reading represents Oxford’s final sentiment on the matter – that “a wife hath caught him,” as an Elizabethan courtier appraised the situation in a letter to his father (Anderson 48). If this is the conclusive declaration by the Bard, it is certainly supported by the consistent decay of Edward de Vere and Anne Cecil’s marital relationship.

The content of All’s Well, which concerns the circumstances of Bertram’s marriage to Helen, clearly contains a message from Shake-speare about his own such experiences. Yet which of these readings is correct? Is it possible that both interpretations could tumble forth from one artist’s perspective? In a sense, I believe it is. Given the sophistication of Shakespearean explications of the often duel nature of a truth, which are found throughout the canon, this sort of paradox is not irreconcilable. Perhaps in the play’s finale, Shake-speare will set our cause aright.
ANALYSIS & CONNECTIONS: ACTS III & IV

During Acts III and IV of the play, the narrative grows a bit wild. We join Bertram in the Florentine conflict, in which his is now embroiled. In terms of the storyline development of *All's Well that Ends Well*, the Italian war is utterly inconsequential. The French king has asserted that his country refuses official involvement but will lend volunteers to the skirmish – young nobles seeking a taste of action. Despite the setting of Italy's embattled country, combat scenery is left in the background, and even there hardly described. The fact that the Bard doesn't take this play's audience to the battlefield colors our perceptions of this category of war. The situation seems almost like children imagining out their epic fantasies on a playground, ever led by their romantic, yet naïve, perception of war's glory. The texture of *All's Well*’s Italian conflict would ring familiar to Elizabethan England. In fact, keys to the dating of this play explored by Oxfordians include textual details concerning the specifics of the Florence-Siena conflict (of *All's Well*) mirroring a squabble between the Netherlands and Spain in the late 1570’s. Like her fictional counterpart, Queen Elizabeth ambivalently lent English volunteers to this cause, more for the opportunity of a warlike workout than as any sort of political investment (Clark 123). Similar particulars of an ambiguous treaty between these nations in 1579 are seen in the “overture of peace” arrived at in *All’s Well*’s side-skirmish (IV.iii.39). The minute detail of the Spanish King’s brother – leader of the forces to the Netherlands – being killed in 1578 is also alluded to in this play, as the widow of Florence relays that the duke’s brother, “their great’st commander,” had been slain (III.v.5). Naturally, these comparable tidbits gain
Oxfordian relevance because of their timing, as it is clear that *All's Well* expresses the events in de Vere’s life during the 1570’s. Furthering the Oxford cause here, we have records of the earl drunkenly boasting about his temporary command, given by the Duke of Florence during his Italian travels, of a cavalry unit during the historical Florentine-Genoan conflict of that period. Our Bertram is named General of the Horse by the Duke of Florence. Yet another modification of Boccaccio emerges here, as his Beltramo serves Florence in only a minor capacity. Viewing this promotion of the story’s leading man through the Oxfordian lens, therefore, affords us another autobiographical rationale (Farina 80).

Following Bertram’s request, Helen returns to Rosillion in Act III, married but husbandless. Surveying the situation, the good Countess expresses irritation at her son for bolting – a likely tribute to Queen Elizabeth’s semi-famous anger over de Vere’s ungranted flight (Clark 116). Then Helen receives Bertram’s relational slam-dunk in the form of this letter:

“When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child Begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me Husband; but in such a ‘then’ I write a ‘never.’”

(III.ii.57-60)

After pondering the message for a few moments, she begins concocting another plan to go after the count. Helen once again “persecutes time with hope” and takes off to claim Bertram’s affections again for the first time (I.i.14). Obviously, this letter was no puzzle crafted by Bertram to test Helen’s mettle and worthiness. He spitefully slings this purposefully outrageous and impossible (he thinks) set of conditions for his yielding to Helen’s love. The aim is to underscore his fundamental rejection of her with pompous
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exclamation – an I’ll-give-in-when-pigs-fly type of compromise. Yet, Helen transforms Bertram’s elusive rhetoric into objective goals! Amazingly she is undeterred by his contemptuous tone and logically reduces the message to a set of tasks. Through both the letter itself, and Helen’s reaction to it, perhaps we are getting a glimpse into de Vere’s simultaneous marveling and irritation at Anne’s possible incapacity to come to terms with his emotional coldness.

Bertram’s letter to Helen also contains a purported cryptic signature of the earl. Note the last line of the message: “but in such a ‘then’ I write a ‘never’” *(an E. Ver)* (III.i.60). While traveling in Europe, Lord Oxford sent his wife a Bible in which he inscribed a poem and a pun-filled admonishment for “truth,” both in Latin. Within the latter, he prompted Anne to hold the motto: “Ever Lover of the Truth” (Ogburn 118). Scholars since have insisted that Lady de Vere would have seen this as, “E. Ver, Lover of the Truth” (Ogburn 118). It would be fitting for the Bard to use the same pun to sneak his real name into *All’s Well That End’s Well*, especially with Bertram writing to Helen. It seems beyond coincidence that such a precise and purposeful wordsmith would use the word “ever” twenty-seven times in a play not centered in the least on philosophical discourses of time or eternity. If these patterns seem too much a stretch for certain readers, they must not be acquainted with the fun our Bard had grafting riddled allusions, bawdy wordplay, and both narrative and linguistic puzzles into the lines of his plays!

The second scene of Act III contains another curious Oxfordian allusion. During this new witty interlude between the clown and countess, Lavatch characterizes the young count as “a very melancholy man,” and says, “I know a man that has this trick of / melancholy sold a goodly manor for a song” (III.i.4, 8-9). This line seems to drift into
the dialogue innocuously and without much import, as this clown has established a flair
for whimsical side comments. However, as with several other of Shakespeare's "allowed
fools," Lavatch's comments often sting with sharp, though veiled, insight. Furthermore,
like Feste of Twelfth Night, this clown figure carries the familiar tune of the playful yet
coverly cunning side of the author's self-reflective personality. Under the cover of
capriciousness, this voice drops into Shakespeare scenes with clues and allusions few
seem to notice or understand. In this case the clown seemingly refers to de Vere's mid-
1570's signing over of a family estate in Essex to musician William Byrd (Anderson 65).
Perhaps this line is a bitter Oxford's internal aside in reference to the mishandlings of his
estate. With Burghley wielding full control over all de Vere property during Edward's
formative years, the young Earl was scarcely aware of his fortune's state. This changed
when Oxford was granted permission to travel and subsequently sought to gather funds.
Discovering the dire state of his material holdings and the massive debts looming, de
Vere was forced to sell off chunks of his land in order to subsidize the trip. A line from
As You Like It perfectly captures the sentiment Oxford must have felt after reflecting
upon this series of decisions: "I fear you have sold your own lands, to see other men's,
then to have / seen much and to have nothing is to have rich eyes and poor hands" (Clark
117). Lavatch's obscure quip, then, echoes this same sentiment with the specific jest
about the unprofitable sale to Byrd, further testifying to Oxfordian authorship.

Indeed, travel is a topic of requisite importance to the authorship validation of
these later acts of All's Well. Resonances of de Vere's own travel through Europe in
1575-'76 emerge throughout the plot's unfolding. Oxford offers us another cryptic key to
his authorship in the seemingly random morsel from Bertram: "I have tonight dispatch'd
sixteen businesses, / a month’s length apiece” (IV.iii.85-85). De Vere traveled on the continent from January of 1575 through April of 1576, a duration of precisely sixteen months (Clark 118). Later, in Act V, Helen’s troupe of conspirators journey from Marseilles to Rossillion, described as a distance of “four or five removes” (V.iii.31), meaning “4 or 5 relay stations along a coach or horseback route” (Farina 78). However, the old Rossillion is traditionally placed in the Pyrenees province of France, making this particular trip through rough terrain much longer than the duration described. Yet, there is another Rossillion in France. On his return trip from Italy, de Vere traveled from Marseilles up the Rhone valley to Lyon – just like his character, Helen, does in this play. The small town of Rossioion, just a few miles south of Lyon, was home to an old Count of Rossillion, whose 16th-century chateau remains standing to this day (Farina 78). While it is not documented that de Vere stayed in Rossillion, he very well could have been entertained by the then-current Countess, who was also the mother of Helena de Tournon.

Part of Helen’s plan for winning Bertram a second time includes feigning her own death, marking another divergence from Boccaccio’s source material. Here, connections to the third source for the Shakespeare version of the story reemerge. This theatrical twist of Helen’s supposed death may represent of an intriguing link to the story of Helena de Tournon. It was said that this gentlewoman “died of love for a young nobleman” (Clark 121). Oxford’s knowledge of this romanticized account may have inspired the nearly fanatical devotion of Helen to Bertram. Shakespeare then gave his Helen a figurative death and resurrection, within her reckless pursuit of the count’s love, as a tribute to Helena de Tournon’s poetic death from an exasperating love. These intersections of plot
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death and resurrection, within her reckless pursuit of the count's love, as a tribute to
Helena de Tournon's poetic death from an exasperating love. These intersections of plot
intricacy, as informed by the unique circumstances of de Vere’s documented tour of Europe, effortlessly endorse the Oxfordian claim to Shakespearean authorship.

For Helen’s plan to regain her recalcitrant husband, the Shakespeare version follows closely the Boccaccian mold. The infamous bed-trick is the ploy both Giletta and Helen use. Implicit in this scheme is the husband’s intention to sow his oats in neighboring fields. Then, under the cover of darkness – and probably large quantities of wine – the forlorn wife (sometimes imposing special conditions on the proposed adultery, such as prohibitions on talking or lights) switches places with the cooperating temptress, and – well, you can surmise the rest. This folk plot devise might have carried a special irony for de Vere – bolstering his attraction to the premise of Giletta of Narbona as a platform for a craftily concealed, dramatized slice of his life – as the reigning suspicion alleges that he was bed-tricked by Anne Cecil during one of their estrangements (Whalen 105, Anderson 145, Farina 81). Biographers confirm that de Vere shunned Anne for a time after she reported being pregnant. Oxford claimed that his wife conceived after he departed for his European sojourn. Later, however, the Earl recanted this accusation, ostensibly after learning that he had fallen victim to a bed-trick. Historian Thomas Wright reports, “He [Oxford] forsook his lady’s bed, but the father of Lady Anne by stratagem, contrived that her husband should unknowingly sleep with her, believing her to be another woman, and she bore him a son in consequence of this meeting” (Clark 119). Again, this line of correlation to de Vere’s life experiences illuminates the play’s thematic sweep as a dialogue about the playwright’s marriage to Anne Cecil. As is implied about the ruse once played on the earl of Oxford, Helen’s bed trick works, and Bertram is none the wiser. After the token exchange of rings seals the deal, Bertram
struts off believing he has “boarded...in ‘th wonton way of youth” the Florentine maid, Diana (V.iii.211). De Vere himself engaged in more than one extramarital affair, though in this similarity to Bertram he hardly stands alone. In an era of glaring, gender-based double standards for monogamy this detail alone hardly isolates Oxford as a Shakespeare candidate.

Act IV also provides the stage for the slapstick undoing of Parolles. Besides its surface function in the plot, this moment prompts some tantalizing speculation about further Oxfordian allegory in All's Well. Assuming Bertram to be the reflective voice of the Bard – Edward de Vere – what is the significance of his serpent-like companion, Parolles? A singular allegorical identity for Parolles has long escaped scholars. Here is a character who, in addition to a firm grip on Bertram’s coattails, also has his ear. Regarded unfavorably by most everyone else in the play, Parolles stokes the fires of Bertram’s dissent, particularly toward Helen: “a young man married is a man that’s marr’d” (II.iii.298). Lafew sees through him, just as Burghley openly disapproved of several de Vere compatriots, and voices his disdain in bursts of scathing insults. Parolles, a man no deeper than his clothes, is finally exposed as traitorous and cowardly, blindfolded and tricked into slandering and betraying Bertram in the count’s secret presence. Yet, what Shakespeare does to punctuate this scene’s revelation is somewhat surprising; he preserves the knave. Once discovered, Parolles resigns himself to the vilification. Embracing his cockroach identity, Parolles is content to survive in any form: “Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live...There’s a place and means for every man alive” (IV.iii.333-334, 339). This consent highlights the reality that beneath the pretentious buffoonery Parolles is comfortable with his organically base nature. He
knows to what strain he belongs, and perhaps is grateful that his façade endured this long. The more compelling question, though, is how Bertram was so efficiently deceived. Though the count vouches for his pernicious companion (III.V.1-9), perhaps Bertram, filling in for young Oxford, abided the rogue knowingly. Parolles is no smooth lago, so maybe Bertram simply gravitated toward one who disrupts the mold of those stifling his independence. This is the same rationale for de Vere’s rejection of all things Cecil, and his embrace of sometime companions who were obvious scoundrels, manifested allegorically in Parolles. Examining his progression in the story with hopes of discovering Parolles’ biographical template, the necessary qualities for the inspirational figure are fairly clear: one-time companion of Oxford’s, manipulative, of ill-repute in corners of the Elizabethan neighborhood, and ultimately a betrayer of the Shakespearean author (when one assumes Bertram as his shadow). Despite the inaction from Oxfordians to squarely identify Parolles, plausible candidates exist.

The intolerable Henry Howard, thoroughly disliked at court, was de Vere’s first cousin. This canny and guilesome man had once taught law at Cambridge, equipping him with the rhetorically manipulative abilities that may have informed the Parolles character. Despite his brother-in-law’s objection to the companionship of such a member of court “reptilia,” de Vere liked Henry and invested himself in the man’s company until 1580. This is the year that Oxford testified against his cousin as a Catholic conspirator. In response, Howard “leveled malicious slanders at de Vere, in order to discredit his testimony” (Anderson xvi). In this era, cheering for Mary Queen of Scots to wear Elizabeth’s crown was a quick route to a cold chop. Remarkably, though, Howard outlived most of his peers, dying an old man of seventy-four (Anderson 136).
Parolles, this Oxford cousin was a survivor—laying low at all the right times, who similarly turned on his friends the moment his neck neared the axe. De Vere later labeled Howard “the most arrant villain that lived” (Farina 80). Bertram’s final appraisal of Parolles, a “Damnable both-sides rogue” seems equivalent (IV.iii.222).

The second feasible human inspiration for Parolles lies in a onetime associate of and servant to the Earl of Oxford, one Rowland York. A swaggering and audacious man, York boasted legitimate military service, but, in the implied vein of Parolles, he changed sides liberally and fought dirty in fencing matches. In 1588 York caught the sharp end of being a “both-sides rogue,” when—after betraying his English brethren to Spain—he was allegedly poisoned by the Spanish (Anderson 115-116). Yet the most compelling York characteristic that Parolles adopts is seen in the way he influenced de Vere’s regard for Anne. Many scholars credit York’s forked tongue, whispering in Oxford’s ear, with watering the seeds of discontent in the earl’s heart over Anne’s seeming infidelity. In this shape Parolles, like York, validates Bertram’s rebuffing of Helen. Despite his nefariousness, de Vere abided York’s company maintained his employment year after year; for as Lafew tells Parolles, “though you are a fool and a knave, you shall eat” (V.ii.53-54). Though Rowland York historically appears more diametrically wicked than the hollow knave, Parolles, these parallels are intriguing and legitimate.

Shakespeare certainly could have drawn from one or both of these individuals as characterizing fuel for Bertram’s “cat” (IV.iii.238). Yet, there is another possible source for Parolles, whose name literally means “words” (I.i.s.d.). Rather than this character representing a historical figure, Shakespeare could be animating a despised side of his own being—one driven not by the objectivity of action but by the power of unchecked
rhetoric to betray his authenticity. Lord Oxford achieved a kernel of renown for his alcohol-fueled tall-tales. Parolles' mouth frequently writes checks that his body is not willing to cash. He, ever draped in flamboyant cloth, signals the side of pomp and show bred through years of hopping through the aristocratic hoops of life. Unequivocally, de Vere was a free spirit trapped in a nobleman of England's preordained lifestyle. As the complex, frustrated and argumentative voices in the canon attest, Oxford probably relished and resented the privileges and trappings of his suit in equal shares. The wild artist in him surely bristled against the endless pageantry of his closely regimented daily life, particularly as a young man. Perhaps this internal paradox of virtuosity bursting forth from the lavish fabric of stale aristocratic superficiality is captured in Bertram's break from and condemnation of Parolles. Writing this play, Oxford might be considering the empty verbosity of a so-called noble life - the hollowness found in Parolles - and what it would take to break from it.

**ACT V: OXFORD'S PURPOSE**

In the final act of the play, all elements of Helen's plan align for the undoing of Bertram (because she loves him?!). All relevant characters gather in Rosillion for Bertram's confrontation, which the king of France - in a seemingly weird misappropriation of State - will preside over. This oddly domestic trial proceeds with a glaring shift in language. Suddenly characters speak directly, transparently, and the dialogue is carried by an unmistakable sense of purpose. Following Helen's preset direction, Diana produces Bertram's ancestral ring and the damning testimony of his dishonorable boarding. As Bertram remains ignorant of the bed trick and is yet unaware
that Helen lives, he feels caught. Even listless Parolles gets in on the action, and Count Bertram squirms as the object of everyone’s disfavor. Despite the overwhelming evidence and more threats from the king, Bertram lies and cajoles, attempting to downplay the circumstances. With much witty prefacing, an apparently resurrected Helen triumphantly enters to claim the prize of Bertram’s pledge. The king rises to acknowledge the reconciliation with an assurance that the relationship seems now to be in order. Thus, as an audience we are once again taken to the ledge for a happily-ever-after leap. Yet, something is amiss

A distinct lack of fulfillment gives us pause. Was that really a happy ending? Am I confident in this now sealed romance? Undeniably, the play’s idea of narrative resolution is almost unpalatable upon reflection. We don’t sense real justice! Bertram has only been caught, and his repentance and reconciliation to the nobler figures of the play are brief and insincere. All’s Well is purportedly a love story. It has twists and turns, obstacles blocking true romance and is wrought with human strife. Don’t these components usually lend themselves to the joyous union of titled two? Here, Bertram mutters nary an ode to the romantic target of this narrative during the entire play. Exacerbating the awkwardness of this love case, Bertram embraces his wife finally at the story’s climax with head-bobbing resignation. After being tricked and trapped by a woman he has run away from, Bertram seems disingenuously acquiescent. Harold Bloom appraises the dramatic conclusion as disconcertingly appropriate: “as for the insufferable Bertram, he goes out on the right note of ludicrous insincerity: ‘I’ll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly,’ which is at least one ‘ever’ too many” (Bloom 356).
Appraising the narrative sweep of this work, one cannot help but feel that the form is a misdirection. The play’s closure offers the semblance of a neatly-packaged moral imperative and happy romance, but disruptions rage underneath. Shakespeare’s distortion of the simple and sappy folk genre is too unsettling to be a mere lampoon. Rather, by exposing the absurdity of such well-wrapped resolutions – particularly in the vexing realm of love relationships, with the inevitable ugly side of their participants – he strives against blessing audiences with yet another stripped-down, feel-good moment after a load of relational consternation. Instead, we are left jarred by subtle twistings of our expectations of resolution. That is, there are no final resolutions in life, and most human relationships are colored by bittersweet tolerance of each person’s flaws. Despite all the narrative leaps and unbelievably of this play’s progression (unexplained magical cures, the efficiency of the bed-trick scheme, Helen’s commitment to this tactless lark), All’s Well is perhaps a more true-to-life caricature of love relationships – full of nonlinear rationality and fickle personas – than that which classic comedies usually offer. Within this depiction, Love as a mystical generality is not substantiated by the fantastical plot and seeming fairytale closure. Just as the conclusion of Bertram and Helen’s courting process is perplexing, Love in this play is a perplexity defined by uncomfortable adjustments, unbalanced appraisals between partners, and resignation to convenience.

The journeys of the play’s characters attest to this disharmony. Ultimately, Bertram/Oxford’s quest to escape to independence and adventure (from Rossillion and the rigidity of Cecil house) collapse into familiar patterns of disappointment without glamour. Bertram runs into more of the same frustration in Paris and Florence, as his troubles pursue him. What he never seems to recognize, though, is their anchoring in his
fundamental identity as a nobleman upon whom others’ expectations are irrevocably
thrust. Contrary to the aim of a folktale journey, Bertram undergoes no significant
transformation because of his traveling to these places, nor from their figurative
representational value – as he might have envisioned. The motif of miraculous
transformation of personality, based on fantastical feats and unplanned circumstantial
development is exposed as a myth in this play. Really, Bertram should not be any more
enamored with Helen after the second winning of him than he was at the first, and he is
not! If anything, he should be shocked that she would go to such extraordinary lengths to
capture the commitment (not affection) of him, and somewhat impressed – if not scared –
by Helen’s resourcefulness and resolve. She tried to prove her worth to him through
sincerity, displayed by deeds, to no avail, and then resorted to ensnaring him through a
formula akin to a legal loophole.

Maybe Helen is left as the figure with most comedic properties – a parody of
those unrealistic protagonists of literature who cling blindly to the misguided notion that
all really be well that seems to end well. Helen truly does, though, benefit from some
strain of a noble portrayal by Shake-speare. In the character and actions of Helen we get
a sort of vindication of Anne Cecil. Yet, at the same time, this figure is subtly portrayed
in a pitiful light, because of her inexhaustible devotion to a rude punk, Bertram, who
makes clear that he wants nothing to do with her. Much like our regard for adolescent
pop culture archetypes whose awkwardly unswerving devotion to an unpleasant and
rejecting social superior (Nerdy Chess Captain’s doomed pursuit of Queen Cheerleader
Goddess) evoke a pained sense of pity rather than respect – All’s Well audiences might
marinate in frustration when Helen’s affection fail to cease when Bertram’s true colors
show through. Certainly, the irrationality of her dedication to the count remains unresolved as he displays no significant personality growth by the play's end: "Bertram has no saving qualities; to call him a spoiled brat is not anachronistic" (Bloom 345).

This uncertainty and cynicism is subtly woven into the king's closing remarks at the end of the play. His final assurance seems to be enclosed in tight, shiny paper, but it is loaded with conditionals: "All yet seems well, and if it end so meet / the better past more welcome is the sweet" (V.iii.333-334, my emphasis). Helen's earlier statement, then, "the fine's the crown" – meaning the end crowns the work – is rendered painfully ironic (IV.iv.35). The end of this story only crowns its message with more convolution. The fact that no true wisdom has been gleaned from this narrative's volatile strategy for love relationships is evidenced in the king's offer to Diana of marriage to any man she chooses from his court. Didn't anyone learn from the debacle his last such promise produced? Alas, it seems that Shakespeare laments the cyclical nature of fantasy romanticism falling prey to cold reality and ambivalent disharmony. He identifies that ill-fated hopefulness of fairytale resolution is destructive not only within his courtly culture, but pertinent also to a general humanity that pushes for perfection in an inconsistent and malfunctioning world. Obviously this is a lesson most coldly won through Oxford's own marriage experience. De Vere, ever blessed and burdened by the penetrating insight of his genius, is torn by the romantic ambitions of his youth and the scars of disappointment dealt to him by a contradictory life experience. The world is too complex for these simplifications and too harsh for such unchecked fantasy. Thus, Shakespeare's central question pierces the façade of folk tale naivety: does anything during life actually end well?
But why does Oxford expose life as a “captious and intenible sieve” (I.iii.202) with such a lack of Shakespearean panache? He has lived this story, and understands that, regrettably, ambivalence is more fitting to reality than idealistic fancy. Perhaps de Vere, through this play reflects on the elations (there were some) and devastations which never seemed to balance experientially in his own marriage, and comes to terms with the inevitability of ambiguous resolution defining his human existence. All’s Well, ultimately, is an unflinching and unflattering partial self-portrait of Edward de Vere and his casual despair.

CURTAIN: WHY THIS MATTERS

Why is it so important to identify real details of a knowable person in the tales of Shakespeare? The Bard, like all writers, drew from personal experience to form his fictions. These gritty details invigorate the study of Shakespeare because fictitious drama grows exponentially in relevance when seen to have grown from authentic experience. Instead of this monumental corpus of literature emerging out of some untraceable, misty visage, we have a canon that rose from the all too human legacy of its author, the 17th Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere. By recognizing the life of de Vere in the Shakespeare canon, we can touch the real drama of his human struggle, providing strength for and insight into our own.

By exploring how All’s Well That Ends Well was derived from Oxford’s life, a truer understanding of its message is gained. This play, along with the rest, was drawn from real experience of relationships, personal triumphs, failed ambitions and internal angst. For us, these connections represent the greatest treasure to be gained from the
reading of Shakespeare. Within these stories a man can be known, and I hope that through the experiences of them we might better understand ourselves and our neighbor.
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