Measure for Measure and *All's Well That Ends Well*: Reinforcing Gender Roles Through Subversion

Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* are two plays that revolve around unlikely couples. Comprised of Mariana and Angelo and Helena and Bertram, both women, at first blush, appear to subvert traditional sixteenth century gender expectations by adopting the masculine roles in their respective relationships, while both men appear to occupy the feminine space of Other. Through a feminist critical lens, this research paper examines sixteenth-century gender roles and stereotypes and how Shakespeare's heroines operate within those social and cultural constraints. Specifically, it seeks to explore the ways in which Mariana and Helena seemingly subvert Elizabethan gender constructs by circumventing rather than submitting to their husbands' wills. It will consider the lengths to which each woman goes to ensure her own self-preservation, including the bed-trick, as well as analyze the internal and external forces that motivate both couples' actions and to what degree those motivations and actions subvert, reinforce or reflect gender expectations as dictated by Elizabethan patriarchy.

In *Measure for Measure*, Lord Angelo and Mariana are contracted to wed five years prior to the play's beginning. But, when Mariana's dowry is lost at sea, Lord Angelo "[swallows] his vows whole" (Gibbons 3.1.215) and breaks off their engagement. To add insult to injury, he further humiliates her by "[pretending] in her discoveries of dishonour" (3.1.211). He, then, spends the next five years avoiding her entirely. During this time, he propositions Isabella, a nun. He is so determined to have her that he threatens to torture and kill her brother if she does not sleep with him. In an ironic twist, Isabella's brother is in prison for engaging in premarital sex—the very same crime that he himself is eager to commit—and impregnating his girlfriend. Even after his underhanded manipulation is exposed and Lord Angelo is given the opportunity to

redeem himself, the Duke must order him to honor his marriage contract and to take Mariana as his wife. Initially, Mariana appears to reticently accept Angelo's poor and unfair treatment of her. However, soon enough, the audience discovers that Mariana is not so easily cast aside. She conspires with Isabella to manipulate circumstances in both their favors. Through the bed-trick, during which Isabella leads Angelo to believe that she will have sex with him, only to substitute Mariana in her place at the last moment, Mariana is able to consummate her relationship with Angelo, thus finalizing the marriage contract he had forsaken years earlier. In the end, then, Mariana uses her resilience and cunning not only to claim what is rightfully hers and to step into the role of wife, but also to preserve Isabella's role as chaste virgin.

Bertram and Helena of *All's Well That Ends Well* are oddly matched as well. After curing the king's fistula and earning the privilege of picking her husband, Helena chooses Bertram. However, he publicly denounces her, refusing to take Helena as his wife because of her low birth, obstinately proclaiming, "I cannot love her, nor will I strive to do't" (Fraser 2.3.137). Bertram eventually marries her but only after repeated threats from the king. Immediately following their wedding, he joins the war to avoid living with Helena as man and wife. He also demands that Helena meets a seemingly impossible list of conditions before he honors their vows and consummates their marriage: "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" (3.2.50-52). Much like Bertram, Angelo proves to be a hypocrite. While he claims not to want Helena because of her low birth, as soon as he arrives in Italy, he attempts to bed Diana, the daughter of an Italian inn-keeper. With impassioned professions of his love, he promises his honorable and true intentions offering himself and all his has for her return affection: "Take my ring! / My house, mine honour, yea my life" (4.2.52-53). Instead, Diana conspires with Helena to

help the latter orchestrate a bed-trick, through which Bertram unwittingly consummates his relationship with Helena and finalizes their marriage contract. Similarly to Angelo, Bertram exhibits no redemptive transformation at the end of his ordeal. He continues to operate in deceit by trying to conceal his attempt to seduce (who he thought at the time was) Diana by concocting an implausible story as to how he came into possession of Helena's ring. Finally, once all has been revealed and Helena has explained how she, through the bed-trick, has met all of Bertram's conditions, she asks, "Will you be mine now" (5.3.304)? To which Bertram replies, "If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (5.3.305-306). This, one must note, is not a, "Yes." Thus, after everything that has transpired—events through which Helena proves herself equal parts gracious, resilient, and clever—Bertram still harbors his original attitude that sees him establish conditions that Helena must meet in order to secure his love. That is, *if* she can prove she is, in fact, pregnant with his child, *then*, and only then, will he love her.

In order to understand how both heroines reinforce sixteenth-century gender expectations, it is first necessary to establish what those expectations are. Politics in the 1500s, as conventionally defined, cannot be understood outside of family politics. "The gender hierarchy exhibited an arrangement where wives were subject to their husbands and, as a result, women were subject to men" (Zetina 11). In fact, the patriarchy represented in the home, which was foundational to both social and political order, directly influenced many of the problems associated with female rule. "The early modern household was seen as a microcosm for the hierarchy of the state" (11). Men were considered superior in every way and that belief was propagated in everyday life, both informally through culture, customs, educations and formally

through the law. “Maintaining the subjugation of women was seen as crucial to maintaining an orderly household” (11).

As a result, the sixteenth-century woman’s roles were decidedly limited. Because a woman’s “objective was immediately linked with another person, a husband, only one vocation, marriage, was proposed” (Dash 35). Few, if any, professions existed for them and what opportunities they did find were menial and low paying. Women who found themselves existing outside the accepted roles of wife and mother, were expected to remain chaste virgins lest they be labeled shrews or whores. Operating within this social construct, then, “young boys [planned] for *what* they [would] achieve and attain, while young girls [planned] for *whom* they [would] achieve and attain” (35).

Bearing in mind the expected gender roles dictated by Elizabethan society, a perfunctory analysis of Mariana’s actions throughout *Measure for Measure* and Helena’s actions throughout *All’s Well That Ends Well* suggests that both heroines subvert the feminine space as is defined by sixteenth-century gender expectations. Bucking the pretense of subservience, they each orchestrate a bed-trick that “functions as an exemplum of feminine agency, not a paean to happy marriages, particularly since both prospective husbands display a pronounced immaturity” (Strong 77). A bed-trick is an explicitly sexual plot device through which a disprized wife, taking the place of another woman, wins back her unwitting husband by making love to him incognito. The lengths to which both women go in order to produce a sought-after effect underscores their autonomy by putting into “praxis their natural right to acquire what is essential to their well-being” (77). Simply defined, “natural rights” are “liberties guaranteed to every person so that they can lead a productive, meaningful life” (77). While those rights certainly apply to both

genders, they do not apply equally to women. In both Mariana and Helena's cases, marrying and "achieving communal stability" with their respective partners is essential to their well-beings.

Angelo is Mariana's "husband on a pre-contract" (4.1.69). However, when she becomes unable to meet the conditions of her engagement to Angelo by providing the agreed-upon dowry, the betrothal is legally terminated. Despite this, Angelo accuses Mariana of immoral behavior, an act that ultimately"…verifies Mariana's need to exert her rights as a wife to protect her name … and to substantiate her rights to the necessities of life—namely, a committed, monogamous relationship" (87). Knowing that sexual intercourse will render their union immediately and irrevocably binding, she puts into play the bed-trick. Such stubborn defiance after five years of quiet submission may at first seem like a sudden and unorthodox reversal of gender roles. Mariana, after all, initiates the circumstances that force Angelo to accept responsibility for his breach of trust. In doing so, she occupies the masculine role by first choosing who she wants and the outcome she desires and, then, by besting Angelo's cunning and deceit to achieve both. Additionally, she acts as the sexual aggressor, forcing Angelo to sleep with her against his will.

However, it is disadvantageous to consider Mariana's actions and their results apart from the motivations that catalyze them. While it may appear that her consummation of her marriage contract with Angelo is a concerted effort "to negotiate her own sphere of power in an otherwise rigid, male-dominated ruling class" (80) and, in doing so, "underscore her imbued right to use her own power…for the preservation of her own nature," she does so with the explicit goal of becoming a vital part of a respected relationship. One cannot consider Mariana's actions outside of Elizabethan gender construct. Women were "defined and contained through their place in the marriage paradigm" (DiGangi 591). Thus, Mariana's seeming subversion of established gender

roles are in actuality an attempt to align herself with them. In doing so, instead of harnessing her power, she "transfers power from herself to Angelo in hopes to gain access to his" (88).

DiGangi posits that all of the women in *Measure for Measure*, not just Mariana, occupy one of two paradigms: maid/wife/widow or virgin/wife/whore. He notes that women's roles are "defined by the mode of sexuality appropriate to them; virginity for maidens, marital chastity for wives, and abstinence for widows" (591). Another way to view it is in terms of each woman's female sexuality, which specifically accounts for their "number and kind of sexual partners: the virgin (none), the wife (one/legal), and the whore (more than one/illicit)" (591). Isabella is a nun; she is defined by her virginity. Mistress Overdone is a prostitute and brothel owner; she is defined by her illicit and illegal sexual activity. Juliet is a pregnant, unwed mother; she is defined by her pregnancy and the fact that she is a fornicator. And Mariana is "nothing" (5.1.196); she is defined by the fact that she is "neither maid, widow, / nor wife" (5.1.196-197). This lack of and desperate search for an identity rooted in a husband is what compels Mariana to orchestrate the bed-trick, which ultimately functions not only to legitimize her marriage to Angelo, finally affording her a place within society, but also to preserve Isabella's identity as chaste version while also saving Isabella's brother's life and, thereby, introducing a third female identity paradigm: life-giver/redeemer/savior.

It's worth noting that the successful commission of the bed-trick brings with it a marked change in Mariana's demeanor and assertiveness. Having legitimized her marriage and cemented her desired and socially accepted role of wife, she seems to find her voice after suffering for years in silence. She wastes no time reminding Angelo, and all within earshot, that they, once merely "affianced" (5.1.225), are now married because they have known each other "carnally" (5.1.211). Mariana's boldness, then, comes as a direct result of her found identity, and her

identity is only discovered once she has fulfilled the stipulations of her marriage contract and can call herself Angelo's wife. Her achievement of that right, then, is a testament to and celebration of her ability to operate within patriarchal constraints while overcoming them. Thus, female subversion in *Measure for Measure* is ultimately used to reinforce a system through which women's identities—both their social standings and their senses of self—are wholly dependent upon the men to whom they belong.

When considering the literary techniques Shakespeare uses to highlight gender roles in *Measure for Measure*, irony is a primary method. Take, for instance, Isabella. Described as possessing "a prone and speechless dialect / Such as move men" (1.2.173-174), she is a nun in training who attracts men without even trying. "Angelo … immediately wants to seduce her, the Duke plans marriage, [and] Lucio, before he knows who she is, addresses her with a cheeky, admiring—'Hail, virgin, if you be…' (Rosenberg 52). In a world where female identity, purpose and, by extension, happiness is the direct result of marriage and domesticity, "one of the chief ironies of the play is that Isabella, possessed of a physical presence that moves men so powerfully, should be planning to immure herself in a manless convent" (53). Through this irony, Shakespeare calls into question the supposed compensatory nature of wifedom and motherhood. Isabella who stands for "sainted purity, Truth and Mercy" (53), finds her power in her aversion to men and endeavors to root her identity in the absence of a husband or sexual discovery rather than in presence of them. Isabella, on the other hand, strives to legitimize her marriage contract with Angelo. Just as Angelo fawns over a disinterested Isabella so, too, does Mariana fawn over a disinterested Angelo. Trickery and deceit are Angelo's primary tools to take Isabella's virginity. He threatens to kill her brother, who has been jailed and sentenced to death for engaging in premarital sex with his girlfriend Juliet, if Isabella doesn't sleep with him.

Mariana also resorts to trickery and deceit, employing the bed-trick to force an unknowing Angelo into consummating their relationship. Though both Angelo and Mariana engage in similar conduct for similar reasons, the later seems infinitely more sympathetic to the former. Perhaps it is because Antonio seeks to kill a man for committing the same crime he is so singularly focused on committing himself with that very man's sister. Perhaps it is because while Angelo seeks sexual conquest merely to satisfy his physical lust, Mariana seeks it for the much more honorable pursuit of legitimizing her place within society. Whatever the characters' motivations or end goals, the play's many ironies beg the audience to reconsider gender roles and their validity within the larger social construct well as their applicability to each character.

Gender roles are similarly called into question and flipped in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Mariana's desire to consummate her marriage to Bertram, a husband of *her* choosing, coupled with her hoydenish nature and her desperate pursuit to cast herself as the feminine object of desire, position her character within the story's masculine role. One way in which Helena occupies the play's masculine space is through her appropriation of "the masculine privilege of the gaze" (McCandless 451), which she uses to objectify Bertram by openly admiring his devilishly good looks. In a sidebar with herself, she confesses that her obsession with Bertram and his unattainability due to their different social and economic standings has left her tortured—a masochistic pleasure. "'Twas pretty, though a plague, / To see him every hour, to sit and draw / His archèd brows, his hawking eye, his curls / In our heart's table" (1.1.97-100). Her attraction to a desire for Bertram, she says, has left her "undone" (1.1.89). Traditionally, this sort of obsessive infatuation which compels the admirer to pursue at all costs the object of desire, is reserved for males. Elizabethan patriarchy dictated that "women's role in society and English culture emphasized virtues such as chastity, modesty, obedience, and silence" (Ward 149). For all

intents and purposes, the goal of a proper, respected woman was to be a non-presence. Thus, Helena is breaking all the rules, ostensibly thumbing her nose at decorum and custom in a no-holds-barred effort to obtain the man she has chosen. There is nothing modest or chaste about her overtly sexual view of him. However, as McCandless notes, even though Helena challenges accepted gender roles, she does not operate in a vacuum. She is ever aware of lines outside of which she must step in order to obtain Bertram. The result is a woman who pursues with male gusto the partner she desires while, at the same time, apologizing "fulsomely for her unfeminine forwardness" (450) and working "desperately to situate herself within the feminine position of desired object" (450). This dichotomy is aptly demonstrated in Helena's opening soliloquy in which she "coveys the plight of a woman trapped between active ("masculine") and passive ("feminine") modes of desire" (450). She compares her to a hind who wants to be "mated by the lion" (1.1.85-92). As such, she exhibits the male desire for physical sex in the form of consummating her relationship with Bertram. At the same time, she acknowledges her position as the hind or passive female who cannot mate but must wait to be mated.

Another way Helena occupies the masculine space is through her coded, yet sexually charged dialogue with Parolles. Unable to plainly express her sexual desire for Bertram, she must resort to playing the "straight man for the swaggering poseur" (455) who seeks a form of sexual release through crass dialogue with another man. The conversation between the two characters takes place in Act 1, Scene two of the play. Using language that McCandless describes as "characteristically elliptical" (451), Helena and Parolles speak of sex and virginity in terms of warfare. Helen equates a man as the natural enemy of a woman's virginity. She confesses that it is difficult to remain a virgin when there are so many soldiers who seek to penetrate her city and blow it up. When Parolles insists that she must "keep him out" (1.2.219), Helena confesses that

her “virginity, though valiant in defense, yet is weak” (1.2.120-121). In thinly veiled terms, then, she expresses her desire for sexual intercourse (to be penetrated) and blown up (impregnated). To which Parolles rather bawdily refers to the male erection in similar terms. “Virginity being blown down, / man will quicklier be blown up. Marry, in blowing him / down again, with the breach yourselves made you / lost your city” (1.2.128-131). This exchange between the two is akin to modern-day locker room talk between two men. Such speech for a woman is most unusual, flying in the face of Elizabethan convention. This is why Helena must address the topic through coded banter. No language or space exists within established gender roles for her to plainly express her sexual desire. “The unspeakability of Helena’s passion … compels her to express it evasively and mystically” (452). Still, the fact that she not only acknowledge her sexuality and the need to satisfy the physical urges it conjures, but also determines to lose her virginity to Bertram through the bed-trick, places her in the play’s masculine role. Still operating within society’s idealized notion of Woman, however, she vacillates between male activeness and female passivity, always aware of the role she is supposed to play and of the space she is meant to occupy. As a result, almost without warning, Helena segues from a bold, self-assured woman who can hold her own in hypersexualized conversation about her virginity to an unsure maiden, seeking the advice of a man more worldly than she by asking Parolles how to go about getting Bertram to sleep with her. “How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking” (1.2.156-157)? Her choice of words is telling. The act of a woman sleeping with a man—even in this case in which the woman is the aggressor—is framed in terms of the female passively “losing” her virginity rather than actively “giving” it. Helena, then, occupied the masculine space while straddling the line between male and female, active and passive, pursuer and pursued.

A third way Helena flips the play's gender roles by occupying its masculine space is through the bed-trick. Similarly to Mariana in *Measure for Measure*, Helena orchestrates this ruse, in large part, to finalize her marriage contract. However, to view the bed-trick in only those terms would be a mistake. Its purpose and its outcome are inherently more complex than that. It is not "simply the consummation of a marriage … but an act of prostitution, in which Helena services Bertram's lust and submits to humiliating anonymous 'us,' and a type of rape, in which Helena coerces Bertram into having sex with her against his will" (450). As the sexual aggressor who has her way with Bertram despite his vocal protestations throughout the play, Helena reverses gender expectation by assuming the role of perpetrator. Bertram does not mince words when it comes to his disgust for Helena and her low birth. He matter-of-factly tells the king, "I cannot love her, nor will I strive to do't" (2.3.156). Furthermore, Bertram tells Helena that he will never call himself her husband unless she meets two seemingly impossible conditions: "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" (3.2.58-61). But Helena is undeterred. Rather she accepts Bertram's refusal to marry her as a challenge, conspiring with Diana, who not only helps her take possession of Bertram's treasured ring, but who also switches places with Helena last minute so as to allow Helena to consummate her relationship with her reluctant groom. True to form, however, operates within the masculine space while maintaining her feminine agency. Though the bed-trick belies her masculine desire, it is a desire "directed toward the culturally approved goal of marriage, an institution that, according to the Protestant doctrine of Shakespeare's time, confirms a woman in femininity by delivering her to permanent chastity—and subservience" (455-456). What femininity Helena does exhibit in *All's Well That Ends Well*, many critics have labeled performative. That is, she is charged with affecting

femininity in a deliberate effort to mask her truly unfeminine character. Though some scholars accusatorily point to this affect as a sign of Helena's inauthenticity or duplicity, it can also be argued that she is simply operating within her internalization of the culturally imposed image of Woman. Thus, Helena does, indeed, simultaneously challenge feminine restrictive standards while conforming to a chaste self-image shaped by Elizabethan patriarchy.

While Helena operates within the masculine role, Bertram exists within the feminine. Most notably, he acts as the object of sexual desire, a role traditionally reserved for females. Bertram's marriage to Helena is a result of a deal she strikes with the king. If she is able to cure his fistula, he will grant her "What husband in thy power [she] will command" (2.1.194). Ross notes that Helena's words "seem almost like a Freudian slip: instead of asking that the King agree to give her whichever husband she will *demand* (subject of the verb: King), she asks the King to give her a husband she will *command* (subject of the verb: husband)" (Ross 190). When Helena makes good on her promise to cure the king, earning the right to choose Bertram as her husband, Bertram is aghast to learn of the fate that has been decided for him. He tells the king "But never hope to know why I should marry her" (2.3.121). Helena, having already taken what she wants, attempts to reframe the circumstances by returning Bertram's masculine powers and reassuming the feminine role. Demurely, she assures him: "I dare not say I take you, but I give / Me and my service ever whilst I love / Into your guiding power" (2.3.110-112). However, Bertram will have none of it. "Disdain / Rather corrupt me ever!" (2.3.126-127). But his pleading falls on deaf ears. Bertram's acceptance of Helena, as far as the king is concerned, is a matter of the king's very honor. He orders Bertram to "Take her by the hand, / And tell her she is thine, to whom I promise / A counterpoise, if not to thy estate, A balance more replete" (2.3.186-189). In the feminine space of Other, then, Bertram is

helpless, subject to the orders of a male who wields total control over him. In fact, Bertram spends much of the play trying to reach a place where he "needs no longer depend upon the honor inherited from his father, nurtured by his mother, decreed by the King, or reflected from his wife" (23). In a role of subservience customarily reserved for women, Bertram is "victimized by the same male oppressors as were women (authoritarian fathers or guardians)" (187), rendering him a man in an endless and fruitless search for autonomy.

As he does in *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare employs irony as a literary technique to highlight gender roles in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Most notably, he uses parallel characteristics and circumstances to place Bertram in the play's feminine space and to place Helena in the play's masculine space. Both characters exhibit dual natures. Like Helena, Bertram wishes to choose his own mate and his refusal of Helena is, in fact, "a refusal to be untrue to love, to his dream, and to his independence" (22). Likewise, Helena's choice and pursuit of him is her refusal to accept anything less than her heart's ultimate desire. Helena earns her honor by curing the king. Bertram desires to earn his own honor through military conquest. The parallels continue:

> Bertram's requirements of Helena as wife, and her own ambitions, gets her into trouble and ultimately gloriously out of it. Moreover, if Bertram is guilty of lies and evasions, so is Helena; if he fails to respect her choice, she will allow him none; if he rejects her, she drives him from her; if he humiliates her by refusing her, she humiliates him by choosing him publicly by readily suggesting that his intentions to Diana are unlawful, and by forcing him publicly to acknowledge his treatment of Diana; if he would seduce Diana, she seduces him and causes Diana's calumniation. If he is immature, she is not yet wise enough to know that capability and ambition are not enough to win a man. (24)

Though their similarities are glaring and actually work together to keep the two apart rather than to unite them, Helena like Mariana is viewed more sympathetically than the man she has chosen to love. Despite being "compelled into a marriage he does not want and then tricked into intercourse he would not have agreed to … Bertram is almost universally condemned" (188). Meanwhile, Helena's masculine dominance over Bertram is disguised throughout the play, her pervasive manipulation minimalized or altogether omitted. This support only more deeply ensconces her in the play's masculine space as she operates as a man within a system created and sustained to work in her favor. Perhaps the play's greatest irony, though, is it's ending. "In romances and fairy tales, and in comedies derived from these types, audience are invited to believe that the marriage or reunion at the end is the panacea to all problems raised in the story and that thereby future happiness is assured" (Gross 258). This assumption can be gathered from the play's title. The expression "All's well that ends well" is akin to "They all lived happily ever after." Because the story ends in betrothal or marriage, all is assumed to be well. But, in the case of Bertram and Helena, "A question that may legitimately be raised is whether we are ever justified in speculating on the future happiness of … such an ill-matched pair" (259). In the case of this play, the goals for which Bertram and Helena so tirelessly strive are likely not worth it. While Helena my not have achieved marital bliss, she does ultimately fortify her identity within society as a wife and mother by gaining a husband in Bertram. In the end, then, no matter how egregiously Helena seems to subvert Elizabethan gender roles, she does so only as a means to reinforce them again.

The couples around which Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* revolve, though unlikely, serve a common purpose. They entice the audience to reexamine accepted gender roles by placing the female characters in the masculine space and the male

characters in the feminine space. From this vantage point, the audience is asked to consider the constraints patriarchy places on identity. Though women occupy vastly different spaces within in both plays, they are relegated to static paradigms that would see them as only maidens, wives, or whores, when in actuality they are far more complex, resourceful, and commanding than the patriarchal system within which the plays exist give them credit for. By employing a feminist critical lens, we can better understand the ways in which Mariana and Helena subvert Elizabethan gender constructs so as not to be victimized by them. Instead, both women exercise their natural rights to happiness rooted in social legitimacy that can only be achieved through marriage and the reinforcement of gender expectations.

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