"Those That Were Enwombed Mine": Adoptive Mothering and Genre in *All's Well that Ends Well* and Shakespeare's Romances

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Until fairly recently, scholars have tended to group *All's Well That Ends Well* with *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida* as one of Shakespeare's "problem plays." Recent scholarship has sought to re-categorize *All's Well* as a romance or tragicomedy instead—a play better suited to comparison with *The Winter's Tale* or *Cymbeline* or *Pericles*. Bryan Love, for example, argued in 2011 that *All's Well* is an early step in Shakespeare's journey toward writing his later tragicomedies and romances.[1] Similarly, in a 2014 article, Byron Nelson seeks to separate *All's Well* out from *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, and instead categorize it with *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*—a move, he suggests, that makes it seem "a fresher and more powerful play."[2] While I do think *All's Well* shares a number of features of these later Shakespearean romances, I will be arguing, through a lens that focuses on mothering (both biological and adoptive or surrogate) in these plays, that *All's Well* ultimately fits neither of these generic categories, but rather forges a distinctive subgenre of its own.

Even as *All's Well* has become increasingly associated with Shakespeare's romances, so scholars have begun to explore those romances and tragicomedies as, in different ways, a "maternal" genre—a genre uniquely interested in examining and even

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embodying mothers' roles and experiences. In 1994, Helene Wilcox argued that "Shakespeare's tragicomedy . . . finds its patterns of action, language, metaphor, and resolution in motherhood, drawing on ideas of maternity in nature, society, royal images, and ordinary experiences. The genre itself, then, may be characterized as a maternal form; the play might usefully be seen as the ultimate maternal body."[3] In response to this claim, Helen Hackett (2000) argues that "The idea of Shakespeare's tragicomic romances as maternal in genre is fruitful in so far as maternity is inherently tragicomic, but the tradition which connects maternity with the actual *generation* of romance narrative is present in most of these plays only in repressed form."[4] More recently, in an article on Shakespeare's romance plays (among which she, like Wilcox, includes *All's Well that Ends Well*), Karen Bamford concludes that, "in *All's Well that Ends Well* and *The Winter's Tale*, to an extent unparalleled in Shakespeare's canon, the wishes of mothers finally matter more than the wishes of fathers."[5]

As these authors point out, *All's Well that Ends Well* does share many elements of the later romances—among them, reunions of mothers and daughters. Just as Thaisa regains Marina and Hermione regains Perdita, so the Countess regains Helena in the end. But what these analyses fail to address is the way in which biological mothering is disrupted by surrogate or adoptive mothering (or, arguably, the way biological mothering disrupts adoptive mothering). In her analysis of the reunion of the Countess and Helena, Bamford notes that the Countess's benevolence toward her adopted daughter, Helena, is distinctive and "runs counter to the conventional representations of both stepmothers or foster-mothers and mothers-in-law . . . and the Countess occupies both those roles in relation to Helena,"[6] but Bamford does not explore further how this observation sets *All's Well* apart from (rather than in alignment with) the other romances with which she groups it. And Bamford fails entirely to mention the widow mother of Diana, a mother whose mercenary desires might be better left unfulfilled at the end of the play.

Some scholars have observed the importance of the adoptive relationship between the Countess and Helena—not in terms of genre, but in terms of female agency and also early modern perceptions of adoptive parenting. For example, in a 2011 essay,

Erin Ellerbeck argues that "the grafting metaphor [for the adoption of Helena into the Countess's family] suggests the Countess's and Helena's power to fashion and refashion their own outcomes within patriarchal hierarchies."[7] And in a 2013 article, Hiewon Shin argues that by "Creating such a refreshingly positive adoptive mother for Helena, Shakespeare defies traditionally accepted notions of negative surrogacy"—thereby undercutting a cultural uneasiness about surrogacy and adoption in his own time.[8]

Yet in plays written not long after this one (and of arguably the same or at least a related genre), the adoptive or surrogate or step- parents undercut familial bonds—especially when those bonds are associated with daughters. Most notable among these adoptive mothers are the Queen of *Cymbeline*, who seeks the murder of her stepdaughter, Imogen, because Imogen rejects her son as a potential suitor; and *Pericles*' Dionyza, who likewise seeks the death of her ward, Marina, because Dionyza does not want her ward to outshine her own daughter. In both cases, the surrogate mothers feel threatened by their wards, who evade their control and undercut their authority and that of their children. Imogen refuses to acquiesce to Cloten's attempts to court her—indeed, she remains faithful to her exiled husband Posthumus—and thereby evades the Queen's attempts to control and potentially to profit from her by achieving the crown through the union of her son with Imogen. According to Cornelius' report of the Queen's confession in Cymbeline, Imogen "Was as a scorpion to her [the Queen's] sight, whose life, / But that her flight prevented it, she had / Ta'en off by poison," and the Queen also ultimately sought "to work / Her son into th' adoption of the crown" (5.5.45-47, 55-56).[9] Similarly, Dionyza defends her attempted murder of Marina to her husband by asserting that Marina "did disdain my child and stood between / Her and her fortunes" (4.3.31-32), and that this

> . . . pierc'd me through,
> And though you call my course unnatural,
> You not your child well loving, yet I find
> It greets me as an enterprise of kindness
> Perform'd to your sole daughter" (4.3.35-39).[10]

In both cases, the adoptive mother sees her actions as "natural"—as defending her aspirations for the fortunes of her own child—rather than as disrupting nature by undertaking murder.

The one "good" adoptive mother in the plays traditionally categorized as romances has already died—and the children she helped raise were boys. Belarius (who has kidnapped Cymbeline's sons and pretends to be their father) reminds us of his deceased wife Euriphile, who "wast their nurse; they took thee for their mother, / And every day [they] do honor to her grave" (3.3.104-5). The wife of the *Winter's Tale*'s shepherd seems to have died even before the shepherd brings Perdita home, so though the shepherdess was "Both dame and servant; welcom'd all, serv'd all; / Would sing her song, and dance her turn" (4.4.57-58) at the festival, Perdita never seems to have enjoyed her presence in a maternal way.[11]

Indeed, in the later romances, it is only the biological mothers who experience the longing for a reunion with their daughters, and ultimately—in a way that supports Bamford's thesis about maternal desire and the romances—achieve that reunion. At the end of *Winter's Tale*, Hermione essentially ignores her husband's exclamations, and focuses entirely on her daughter as she asks, "Tell me, mine own, / Where hast thou been preserv'd? where liv'd? how found / Thy father's court?" (5.3.123-25). Like Persephone returning to Ceres, Perdita brings "natural" springtime to Sicilia, and renews the "natural" cycle as she rejoins with her biological mother. Similarly, even as Marina's heart "Leaps to be gone into my mother's bosom" (5.3.45), Thaisa embraces and claims her, "Blest, and mine own" (5.3.48). Echoing the precise words of Hermione, Thaisa reclaims her daughter (even at the expense of her father's claims) and emphasizes the "natural"—and uncanny—bond between them.

In *All's Well that Ends Well*, the pattern of mother/daughter or adoptive mother/daughter relationships is reversed. In *All's Well*, it is the biological mother of a daughter who commodifies and essentially sells her daughter, while (as Ellerbeck and Shin have noted), it is the Countess as adoptive mother who proves the most loving, and who is willing to side with her adoptive daughter over her biological son when the latter disowns the former. I will be suggesting that this reversal contributes to the problematizing of the genre of this play and, in fact, removes it from the realm of both "problem play" and "romance" as it becomes a near-tragedy that doesn't so much "give birth" to comedy (as Helen Wilcox has suggested[12]), but rather, as I here propose, "adopts" it.

The tragedy to which *All's Well* is perhaps most closely linked is *Romeo and Juliet*, and this connection emerges initially through names. In Shakespeare's source for *All's Well* (the *Decameron*), the Helena character's name is Julietta. The Shakespearean name change distances Helena from the tragic world of that character, and connects her with the brightly comic Helena of *Midsummer*. In addition, whereas the Widow (Diana's mother) in the source is unnamed, in *All's Well*, she is the Widow Capilet (connecting her with Lady Capulet of *Romeo and Juliet*). Furthermore, I would suggest, as mother/daughter relationships in Shakespeare go, these two are strikingly similar, for in both cases, the mothers negotiate either against their daughters' wills or without their consent to broker an arrangement that will be economically (and also presumably relationally) advantageous to the family. Both mothers recognize the economic value of their daughters' (perceived) virginity, and both work to capitalize on that value. Lady Capulet of *Romeo and Juliet* urges Juliet to be the book cover that would "beautify" Paris, the "unbound lover," such that Juliet can "share all that he doth possess, / By having him, making yourself no less" (1.3.87-88; 93-94).[13] When Juliet finally refuses Paris, and Lady Capulet realizes that there is no chance of the union, she casts off her daughter entirely: "Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word. / Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee" (3.5.202-3).

Similarly, although the cost for her daughter is participation in a bed trick rather than marriage, the Widow Capilet of *All's Well* sells her daughter's services for financial gain. When Helena agrees to pay the Widow Capilet of *All's Well* for her daughter's participation in the bed trick ("Take this purse of gold, / And let me buy your friendly help thus far / Which I will over-pay and pay again / When I have found it" [3.7.14-17]), the Countess—without consulting her daughter—confirms to Helena that, "I have yielded" (3.7.36), and places her daughter Diana in Helena's hands.[14] Emily Gerstell has convincingly argued that, by agreeing to the bed trick plan with Helena, the Widow will be enabled, "though cooperation with Helena and manipulation of Diana, to move closer to her former 'well born' estate" (3.7.4); "Whereas the 'virgin' gets the precepts, . . . the Widow reaps the rewards."[15] Ultimately, the widow merely uses her daughter's virginity (highlighted by her name, Diana) as an item of value to Helena—and in the end, of

value to the Widow herself, as Helena pays her for her services. It is notable, too, as Gerstell points out, that Helena's payment to the Widow will be used as Diana's "dower" (4.4.19)—though Diana herself had said just two scenes before that she prefers to "live and die a maid" (4.2.74).[16] Thus, the Widow is willing to overwrite her daughter's desire in her (the widow's) bid for her own personal gain.

In the end, Diana does as her mother bids, and thereby negates her own desires—a sort of self-annihilation. She sets up the rendezvous with Bertram, and informs us, after she has done so, that "My mother told me just how he would woo, / As if she sate in 's heart. She says all men / Have the like oaths" (4.2 69-71). The Widow Capilet has schooled her daughter in the clandestine endeavor in order to ensure its success, and Diana has performed well. But in the end, Diana's choice to remain a virgin is undercut when the King, assuming she will marry, extends to Diana a choice (on the condition that she is still a virgin) that echoes the request of Helena in the beginning: "If thou beest yet a fresh uncropped flower, / Choose thou thy husband, and I'll pay thy dower" (5.3.327-28). Helen's initial request and the king's granting had disastrous consequences that set the potential tragedy of the play in motion, and that led Diana to being in the disastrous situation in which she finds herself. To choose would be to restart the cycle (not of life and rebirth, but of discord and disarray); but not to choose would be to defy the king, and likely her mother.

The play has demonstrated the shortcomings of choosing a spouse—especially in a one-sided way—from the beginning. Helena had wished to choose her own husband, and cured the king so she could receive this favor of choice at his hands. Yet when she does make the choice, she faces rejection and loss as a result. The sexual union—in which Bertram himself doesn't know he has engaged—results in Helena's pregnancy, and thereby her ability to reclaim Bertram. But this "young one" that she feels "kick" within her was conceived through trickery—not Bertram's choice—and is among the agents (along with the ring) that compels him to remain in the marriage with Helena. In this play, unlike in the *Decameron* source (in which the Julietta brings her strapping twin boys to meet their father), the child has not been born. And like the unborn child, I would suggest, the comedy of *All's Well* has not been "birthed" as it has in the later romances. The "reunion" in the

end here—between wife and husband, father and unborn child—scarcely lives up to the high drama of the reunion between Leontes, Hermione, and Perdita; Cymbeline, Guiderius, Arvergaus, and Imogen; or Pericles, Marina, and Thaisa. If anything, Bertam's reunion with Helena is reminiscent of Angelo's forced marriage to Mariana (or Lucio's forced marriage to Kate Keepdown, whom he has impregnated) in *Measure for Measure*—parallels that land the play back in the realm of the "problem."

And yet, there is a happy reunion at the end of the play—that of Helena and the Countess. When she catches a glimpse of the Countess, Helena shifts her attention from Bertram to the Countess (never to return it to Bertram), and exclaims with happiness, "O my dear mother, do I see you living?" (5.3.319). Her attentiveness to the Countess at the expense of her husband is suggestive of Hermione's attention to Perdita at the expense of Leontes (another reversal). But notably, as we know, the Countess is Helena's adoptive, rather than biological, mother. This is not the reunion of Ceres and Persephone, but that of Tethys and Hera—a surrogate mother who has chosen to protect and nurture, and an adopted daughter who (having earlier resisted the idea of the Countess as "mother") has chosen to accept the relationship. Whereas earlier instances of "choosing" in the play—primarily, the choosing of a spouse—have led to discord, this one leads to the construction of a loving family. It is this choice, I would argue, that opens the space for the play to choose to lift itself out of the realm of tragedy and into that of comedy.

As Helen Wilcox establishes her argument about Shakespeare's tragicomedies as a "maternal" genre, she draws heavily on the language and imagery of childbirth. For example, she sees these plays as "laboring in near tragedy but eventually and with difficulty giving birth to a life-affirming conclusion."[17] According to her argument, "Like childbirth, the endings of the tragicomedies can only come about at the appointed time."[18] She even suggests that Helena's statement in the first scene of *All's Well* that "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie" refers not only so self-sufficiency, but also to "the female power of reproduction, bearing 'in ourselves' the life of the future."[19]

But notably, the mother whom Helena knows and acknowledges throughout the play did not bear Helena "in herself." Indeed, according to the Countess, Helena was rather

"bequeath'd to my overlooking" (1.1.38-39), and the Countess has been left with the choice of how to define the relationship. Early in the play, she claims to Helena that, "I am your mother, / And put you in the catalogue of those / That were enwombed mine" (1.3.142-4). Even though Helena "ne'er oppress'd me with a mother's groan," claims the Countess, "Yet I express to you a mother's care" (1.3.142-48). The Countess's language is deliberate, indicating agency and choice: she has consciously placed Helena in the catalogue of her biological children, and has chosen to care for her in a maternal way. Later, when the Countess receives word that Bertram has rejected Helena, she asserts to Helena, "He was my son, / But I do wash his name out of my blood, / And thou art all my child" (3.2.66-68). This angry outburst later proves to be just that—a moment of fury that the Countess backs away from as she expresses concern for her son through the rest of the play. But her deliberate choices in relation to her son and adopted daughter set her apart from, for example, Cymbeline's Queen, who supports Cloten only because he is her biological son, and seeks Imogen's death only because she is a threat to Cloten's power. *All's Well* emphasizes the issue of choice in parenting in a way that none of the later romances and tragicomedies do.

What, then, does the fact that the final happy reunion involves an adoptive relationship suggest about the genre of this play? I would argue that, whereas the later romances emphasize natural cycles (birth, death, rebirth)—and represent adoptive/surrogate parenting as unnatural, outside of these cycles, aligned with the tragic—*All's Well* emphasizes instead the importance of human (and dramatic, and generic) choices and their consequences. It is the power of Helena's initial choice for Bertram that sets the play in motion, and the proffered choice of Diana that spins the possibility into the future. But it is the choice of the Countess for Helena—and Helena's acceptance of that choice in the end—that brings the comic ending into being.

And so, I would suggest, the reversal in the paradigm of biological parent/adoptive parent in this play ultimately sets it apart from the other tragicomedies and romances. But I think this reversal also sets it apart from other "problem plays" like *Measure for Measure*, in which mothers scarcely appear at all, and in which the tragedy is never really contained in the forced marriages that

are announced at the end. *All's Well That Ends Well* might better be seen as a play whose trajectory makes a deliberate choice of difference—a trajectory in which, like the Countess's choice to "mother" Helena, to bring something constructive out of the deaths of her husband and Helen's father, a comic ending is *adopted*.

Notes

1. Bryan C. Love, "Ending Well: Mixed Genres and Audience Response, 1604-06," *Renaissance Papers* (2011): 53–64.

2. Byron Nelson, "Helena and 'the Rarest Argument of Wonder': All's Well That Ends Well and the Romance Genre," *Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference* 5 (2012): 2.

3. Helen Wilcox, "Gender and Genre in Shakespeare's Tragicomedies," in *Reclamations of Shakespeare*, ed. A. J. Hoenselaars (Amsterdam: Brill Academic Publishers, 1994), 137.

4. Helen Hackett, "Shakespeare's Romance Sources," chapter 9 in Helen Hackett, *Women and Romance Fiction in the English Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 156-7.

5. Karen Bamford, "'It Hath Happened All as I Would Have Had It': Maternal Desires in Shakespearean Romance," in *Maternity and Romance Narratives in Early Modern England*, ed. Karen Bamford and Naomi J. Miller (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2015), 131.

6. Bamford, "It Hath Happened," 126-27.

7. Erin Ellerbeck, "Adoption and the Language of Horticulture in *All's Well That Ends Well*." *SEL Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 51, no. 2 (2011): 321.

8. Hiewon Shin, "Single and Surrogate Parenting in *All's Well That Ends Well*," *SEL Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 53, no. 2 (2013): 337.

9. William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*. All references to Shakespeare's plays are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997). Line numbers will be referenced in the text of the essay.

10. Shakespeare, *Pericles*.

11. Shakespeare, *Winter's Tale*.

12. Wilcox, "Gender and Genre," 136.

13. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*.

14. Shakespeare, *All's Well that Ends Well*.

15. Emily C. Gerstell, "All's [Not] Well: Female Service and 'Vendible' Virginity in Shakespeare's Problem Play," *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 4 (2015): 196-97.

16. Gerstell, "All's [Not] Well," 201.

17. Wilcox, "Gender and Genre," 136.

18. Wilcox, "Gender and Genre," 136.

19. Wilcox, "Gender and Genre," 137.