

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Magic and Divine Grace

Helen in *All's Well That Ends Well* is an embodiment of divine grace. Helen persuades the King that despite his pessimism, she can cure his 'terminal' illness and she attributes this to the 'greatest grace lending grace.' The King's defeatism is expressed to us clearly at the beginning as in Scene Two he remarks 'farewell' to his court several times and furthermore, refuses Lafeu's invitation to be cured bluntly and stubbornly. It is through the King's defeatism that Helen becomes a symbol of divine grace for if the King is definitely feels he will die then if a lowly, poor ward can cure him, it must be a miracle. By the end of Scene Two, Helen's 'inspired merit' and 'confidence' gives the King hope from recovering from his disease and judges Helen as a 'blesséd spirit'. Contextually, Helen's connection to grace can be seen as a response to the Reformation of the Calvinist exclusivity to who receives grace from God or if grace can be achieved through the Catholic teachings of good work and meriting salvation. Helen, although born of lowly rank and in a poor situation of orphanage, is rewarded for her 'heavenly effect' on the King as he grants her a choice of husbands, a rare occasion. The King's language emphasises Helen as a symbol of divine grace as she is given the 'power to choose, and they none to forsake.' Calvinist traditions of God are rife here as we see Helen with power to determine who her husband is. This echoes the Calvinist God's determination of who will be 'elected' and saved.

Gender and Rank

What makes *All's Well That Ends Well* particularly remarkable are the literal gender role diversifications that take place. Unlike Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the character of Helen, the young female heroine takes on the role of a male metaphorically as she demonstrates the roles of her father in order to advance her rank amongst the court of Roussillon and demonstrate her witty, gender-defiant opinions. For example, in a conversation with Paroles, Helen is quick to retort to his rudeness as he asks 'Are you meditating on virginity?' in Scene One. Helen metaphorises virgins to towns and how men are soldiers who've 'assailed' them. Here, Helen does not particularly categorise within Jacobean traditional sexual status yet it does enlighten the audience to the male role that Helen will later take on. However, one question that can be raised is if Helen is only acting like this in order to advance her role and then become the woman she wants to be. As soon as she is able to choose and elect her husband Bertram, she quickly plays into the Jacobean tradition of the virgin and wife being physically and contained by those boundaries. She quickly strives to be obedient after marriage stating, 'In everything/I wait upon his will' in Act Two, Scene Five and even explicitly remarking, 'I am your most obedient servant.' Helen is clever in achieving her husband through acting like a male yet she is most clever in conforming to the traditions of wifery to maintain happiness.