

Illness in *All's Well That Ends Well*

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All's Well That Ends Well can be called Shakespeare's most medical play. It features a female protagonist, Helena, who cures the French King of a fistula and then problematically 'cures' her own 'lovesickness' by pursuing and later tricking her unwillingly married husband Bertram into consummating their marriage. The paper will explore the representation of illness in the play, arguing that illness becomes a rich discursive site upon which the play encodes gendered desire and agency. This is particularly evident in the case of the medically skilled and sexually attractive Helena. The paper will argue that Helena's epistemological privilege, and her sexual desire for Bertram, translate into a complex, contradictory female agency that she mobilises by curing illnesses (her own and others'). It will argue that her (unsatisfactory) final 'cure' of lovesickness is significant in that it ensures that power, and the ability to control the play's narrative, are in her hands. The paper will explore manifestations of illness as both physical disease and lovesickness (the latter of which was held to be a real disease in the early modern period), and will support this with critical literature and contemporary medical theory. It will also pay attention to the King's malady and Bertram's problematic 'sick desires' (4.2.35) for another character, Diana, as points of comparison with Helena's lovesickness.

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