



ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

2010 STUDY GUIDE



American Players Theatre
PO Box 819
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ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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Cover Photo: Matt Schwader as Bertram and Ally Carey as Helena.

Photo by Carissa Dixon

All photos by Carissa Dixon and Zane Williams.

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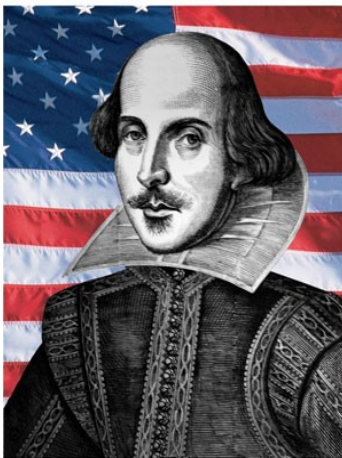


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If you have any questions or comments regarding the exercises or the information within this study guide, please contact Emily Beck, Education Coordinator, at 608-588-7402 x 107, or ebeck@americanplayers.org.

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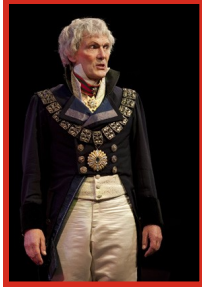
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Who's Who in *All's Well That Ends Well*
(From *The Essential Shakespeare Handbook*)



King of France (Jonathan Smoots)



He is about to die when Helena brings him a remedy: she asks that he allow her to marry the lord of her choice.

Parolles (Jim DeVita)



A parasitical follower of Bertram, he proves himself a hollow trickster. Ambushed by his fellow Frenchmen near the Florentine camp, he betrays the entire squadron including Bertram in order to avoid torture.

Bertram (Matt Schwader)



Count of Rossillion, he is a ward of the King of France, but when the King insists that he marry Helena, he flees to Italy.

Lafew (John Pribyl)



An old lord, he does not understand the new generation and he especially fails to appreciate Bertram's hanger-on Parolles.

Countess of Rossillion (Tracy Michelle Arnold)



Mother to Bertram she initially mourns both her husband's death and the departure of her son. She later grieves over Helena's "death" and cuts off ties with her son.

Widow (Sarah Day)



A Capilet of Florence, she is old and eager to help Helena, who she pities.

Helena (Ally Carey)



A young girl brought up by the Countess, she loves Bertram and cleverly wins him as her husband.

Diana (Susan Shunk)



Daughter to the widow, she remains as chaste maid throughout the play, even though Bertram believes differently



ABOUT THE PLAY



ACT I

Bertram, the Count of Rossillion, is leaving his mother, the Countess of Rossillion to go with his companion, the unscrupulous Parolles, to the court of France. Bertram is travelling under the guardianship of the King of France, who has for some time been seriously ill. Also saying goodbye to Bertram is Helena, the daughter of the late physician to the Rossillion family. She has been raised under the protection of the Countess, and is in love with Bertram. However, she resigns herself to the fact that he will never love her because she was born to a lower **CLASS** than he. After Bertram leaves, Helena confesses her love to the Countess, who actually encourages her to pursue her son. So Helena follows Bertram to France with plans to cure the King and win the hand of her love.

CLASS: *The only way to become a member of nobility in Elizabethan England was to be born to it or granted a title by the royal family.*

ACT II

HEAL: *Possibly using ingredients such as tobacco, arsenic, lily root and / or dried toad, which were used to cure Bubonic Plague.*

When Helena arrives at the French court, the King does not fully trust her skill to **HEAL** him, despite his knowledge of her father's reputation. So she makes a bargain with him: Helena will pledge her life that she can help him and if she is successful, she asks only that she be allowed to choose her own husband from the ranks of eligible nobles of the court. Helena's remedy, taken from her father's old books, is successful and when she is given her choice of husbands,

she predictably picks Bertram. His reaction is less predictable. While other lords would have been thrilled to gain such a lovely and clever wife, Bertram scorns Helena in front of the entire court, objecting to her low social status and to the constraint marriage would put on his young life. The King, however, acting as Bertram's guardian, insists that he accept Helena and the marriage is performed. But Bertram is not yet beaten. He runs away to the **WARS IN ITALY** and sends Helena a letter telling her that until she can obtain his ancestral ring from his finger and have a child begotten by him, then and only then will he accept her as his wife – certainly an impossible task.

WARS IN ITALY: *The 1600s were a period of unrest in Europe brought on by (among other things) food shortages and economic difficulties. Monarchs were increasing taxes to build their armies, and marching toward the 30 Years War (1617).*

ACT III

Helena, who has returned to Rossillion (and who evidently doesn't know when to take a hint), then sets off for Italy disguised as a pilgrim. She arrives in Florence where she hears stories of the valor of Bertram and also of the licentious way in which Parolles leads his master into evil ways. A widow who invites Helena to lodge at her house tells how Bertram has been soliciting her own daughter, Diana, to be his mistress. Helena at this point has hatched a new plan, and suggests that Diana pretend to agree to

ADULTERY: *Elizabethan nobility could be tortured or even executed for adultery, as it was sometimes considered treason.*

Bertram's request, but Helena will herself take Diana's place in her bed in order to fulfill her husband's conditions and to save his virtue by tricking him into avoiding **ADULTERY**. The widow agrees, and tells the girl to promise Bertram that the ring will be replaced by another when they are in bed together.



ABOUT THE PLAY

Continued



ACT IV

TRAITOR: *In Shakespeare's time, being a traitor was a capital offense. So if the soldiers had gone so far as to turn Parolles in, he could look forward to a beheading, as he was a member of the court. Commoners were hanged.*

Everything goes according to plan, and afterward Bertram (who is still unaware of the trick) returns to the camp. There he finds that his braggart “friend” Parolles is to be tested for his courage. Of course, he turns out to be a complete coward and a **TRAITOR**, and rats out all of his fellow soldiers. Fortunately, unbeknownst to him, he is ratting them out *to* his fellow soldiers as well.

ACT V

Helena, Diana and the widow all return to France where they go to court and spread the rumor that Helena died on her pilgrimage. Bertram hears the false news and makes plans to return to France. After he arrives, he consents to marry yet another woman, who asks that he supply a ring for the betrothal. So he gives her father the ring “Diana” had given to him, which the King immediately recognizes as one he had given to Helena. He then asks how Bertram got his hands on it, and, when Bertram once again lies frantically, the King accuses him of murdering her. At that moment, a letter from Diana arrives. She calls for justice since Bertram has not kept his promise to marry her. She then enters and tells her story. Bertram is attempting to wriggle out of this new mess when Helena (whom he has developed a new appreciation for since her “death”) appears. Helena announces the fulfillment of all Bertram’s conditions, and he now willingly accepts her as his wife. Diana is offered a large dowry and the promise of a suitable husband, the King and the Countess are pleased with the outcome, and Bertram promises to love Helena “**DEARLY, EVER, EVER DEARLY.**”

DEARLY, EVER, EVER DEARLY: *While much as been made of whether or not this line rings true after all Bertram's shenanigans, we believe that he has finally come to see Helena as a person worthy of his love and respect. But the important question is: what do you think?*



APT'S ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL



Every production of a play is different, and being on an outdoor stage is different than most. So plays at APT come with their own unique challenges (rain, heat, bugs) and amazing benefits (moonlight, birdsong, summer breeze). And the outdoors is at the forefront of everyone's minds, from designers to actors to patrons.

"I am a devotee of outdoor theater" says Ally Carey, who plays Helena. "Nothing - no indoor space I've seen - compares to making magic by the light of the moon.

Especially Shakespeare, who writes about nature and the scope of the world and our lives... under the big bowl of the sky, you can feel what he's talking about."

To help protect actors from the sometimes extreme weather conditions that occur under "the big bowl of sky", APT's talented costume designers go so far as to create wardrobe that functions as air conditioning, with pockets for ice packs built in to keep the company cool. *All's Well That Ends Well* costume designer Robert Morgan says: "Costumes must be built like armor but look and function like clothing. Heat, wet, athletic activity, emotional distress—all these take their toll on silk dresses and white trousers. Costume design involves intellectual acuity, dramatic insight and intense personal interaction with the actors. Satisfaction comes from the complex process of design, the eventual success onstage of the storytelling before a live audience, and, selfishly, simply creating beauty."



Rendering by Robert Morgan

Just as complex is the work done on the set. With up to five different productions running on the outdoor stage at a given time, sets are often set up and torn down in the space of several hours. That's hard work for the production assistants, but it also offers a challenge to APT set designers. Fortunately, the theater works with talented scenic artists like Takeshi Kata. According to Takeshi, "I look at research images, do sketches, look at possibilities for the ground plan and work on a scale model of the set. Once we know what the set is going to be, I draft the set and put together information for the various shops who make our vision come true. It was important to us that the story remain focused on Bertram and Helena and their youth. The red, I think, helps us create a sense of adventure...I love the strong color and how well it is able to transform from scene to scene. The director and the rest of the creative team discuss the play and how to best tell the story. "

Model by Takeshi Kata





APT'S *ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL* CONTINUED



The director's vision lays the groundwork for how the play will turn out: what themes are emphasized and how the characters are portrayed. Director John Langs' choices in this play make a huge difference as to how the audience feels about the characters. Bertram and Helena are complex, at times confusing and even unlikeable. John found things to love in them, though, and hopes that his opinion carries over to the audience.



“The first thing you always hear about *All's Well That Ends Well* is that it's a problem play. Why is it a problem play? Well, it's a problem play because there's this girl, who likes this guy a lot. A *lot*. And this guy's not such a great guy to her. And yet she does crazy things to be with this guy.” says John. He continues, “And I started to take notes of the events of this play, and I fell in love with her. She owns her life. She says ‘I love this man, and he is out of my station. I will never get him, but I love him. She organizes a trick where the King of France puts her hand in his hand and says he's yours. She gets rejected in front of everyone. She fakes her own death. She travels into a war torn country. She tricks this guy, and then she comes home and stands in front of everyone and says ‘I gotcha. And I thought, wow that is FANTASTIC!’”

So while the director's vision kicks it off, much of the way a character is perceived has to do with the actor's interpretation, and Ally Carey and Matt Schwader have some insights to share about Helena and Bertram. According to Ally “Helena has an amazing gift for forward motion. She is not deterred by grief or hopelessness; she says: 'Yes. That was awful. Now what am I going to do about it?' This is a life skill I have learned from her in working on the play. She is not confined by expectation—he does what feels true.



“Helena loves Bertram because... it seems like a mystery sometimes, doesn't it? For me: they have grown up together, and she knows what kind of person he is—and what kind of person he will be. And she loves that. She has seen him at his best and at his worst, and he has seen her. And he can make her laugh!”

If Helena asked me for advice, I'd give her the ‘if he can't see how great you are...get over him!’ speech and hand her a pint of Ben and Jerry's. But her faith in him and in the possibility of love for them is fierce and I know I'm not alone when I say I've been there. She believes it into existence, and maybe all is well that ends well.”

If possible, Bertram is even a bit trickier to portray. It would be easy to let him fall into the category of spoiled, self-centered jerk and leave him there. But APT's production—thanks in large part to core company member Matt Schwader—shows that people's behavior is rarely that simple. According to Matt, “The largest challenge in playing Bertram is generating any empathy from the audience. I have to really use my imagination to create a more three-dimensional, believable character. Helena has all these monologues to the audience in which she shares



APT'S ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL
CONTINUED



her hopes and dreams of marrying Bertram, but Bertram doesn't get a chance to share with the audience his hopes and dreams. I think Shakespeare does this on purpose for a couple of reasons. One: he needs the audience to be rooting for Helena (if they heard that Bertram had plans for traveling, seeing the world, becoming a war hero and marrying a princess then the audience might not want Helena to succeed so much) and two: it's just a lot more dramatic if the audience doesn't know what to expect.”

“Finally,” Matt says, “finding himself forced into marriage, Bertram runs off to war and many unfortunate misadventures that he ultimately lives to regret. Misadventures that are not unlike what most people experience in their younger years—who hasn't said or done something they totally regret? Also, the class system aspect of the play lends to this uphill battle for empathy. To an American audience in 2010 the idea of not wanting to marry someone of lower status is unacceptable. In Shakespeare's time and place it made a lot more sense, so Bertram's lines about class distinction might have actually been a pretty fair, though unsavory point. These two features create quite an obstacle for empathy from a modern audience, but on the other hand the obstacle is a fun one to attempt to overcome!”

That being said, there are certainly likeable aspects to Bertram. “I love that Bertram is the complete embodiment of a young, willful man.” Matt continues. “I remember being a teenager and feeling fed up with the fact that all these grown ups were always making up my decisions for me and controlling my world. I think almost every teenager goes through a period where they just want everyone to stop telling them what to do! Some of us happen to go a little overboard in rebellion to authority. The best piece of advise I could give him would be to treat others as he would want to be treated himself. Bertram is so involved with what he wants (or doesn't want) that he doesn't see the beauty and fragility in the people around him. As a result he hurts the world instead of making it a better place. The funny thing is that he gets all that good advice again and again. His mother says as much to him and the King as well, but he has to learn it on his own.”

The question of whether or not all's well really does end well has been debated for centuries, and will probably be debated for centuries more. After all, it's a pretty quick change of heart for such a seemingly self-centered guy. But John Langs doesn't think an ambiguous ending is such a bad thing.

“I LOVE that this play ends after so much has happened with these two characters standing center stage, looking at each other and thinking ‘now what?’” says John. “Because the end of the play is just that. What happens after that, we'll never know.”





All's Well That Ends Well Photo Summary



Our story begins with the death of the Count of Rossillion, and his son Bertram's departure for the French court.

"In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband."

- The countess of Rossillion, ACT I, SC I



Helena, a young girl under the care of Bertram's mother—the Countess of Rossillion—confesses her love for him and hatches a plan to win his hand by curing the ailing King of France.

"By th' luckiest stars in heaven; and would your honour but give me leave to try success, I'd venture the well-lost life of mine on his grace's cure."

- Helena, ACT I, SC I.



Helena's plan works so far as she cures the King and he promises Bertram to her, but Bertram himself is none too happy about giving up his new found court life for marriage to a commoner.

"She had her breeding at my father's charge—A poor physician's daughter ever my wife! Disdain rather corrupt me ever!

- Bertram, ACT II SC III



Bertram confers with his opportunistic friend Parolles about his dilemma and they determine he should flee France for the wars in Italy.

"...tonight, when I should take possession of the bride, end ere I do begin."

- Bertram, ACT II SC IV



Helena receives word that Bertram has deserted her unless or until she can meet his impossible conditions. Helena imagines she is responsible for putting Bertram in harm's way and follows him to Italy.



Once in Italy, Bertram learns about the reality of war, and begins his (very slow) journey toward maturity.

“Great Mars, I put myself into thy file; Make me but like my thoughts, and I shall prove a lover of thy drum, hater of love.”
-Bertram, ACT III SC III.

“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.’”

- Helena reading Bertram's letter, ACT III SC II



Arriving in Florence, Helena meets Diana, who Bertram is pursuing. She has so far spurned his advances because he is married, which leads Helena to the next phase of her scheme.

“I would he loved his wife: if he were honest
He were much goodlier.”
- Diana, ACT III SC V



The French troops set out to prove to Bertram that Parolles is a coward by kidnapping him under the guise of enemy soldiers.

“He's a most notable coward, an infinite and endless liar, an hourly promise-breaker, the owner of no one good quality worthy of your lordship's entertainment.”
- Second Lord, ACT III SC VI



Per Helena's plan, Diana tells Bertram to meet her and to supply her with his family ring. In return, he'll get a different ring (and her virginity). But with Bertram blindfolded, Helena and Diana switch places.

"A heaven on earth I have won by wooing thee."

-Bertram to Diana, ACT IV SC II



To Bertram's surprise and disappointment, Parolles does indeed break and give up information on everyone in the army, including Bertram himself. Bertram forsakes his former friend, but Parolles is just happy to be alive.

"Yet I am thankful: if my heart were great, 'Twould burst at this. Captain I'll be no more, but I'll eat and drink, and sleep as soft as captain shall."

-Parolles, ACT IV SC III



"My lord, this is a fond and desperate creature whom sometime I have laugh'd with."

- Bertram, ACT V SC III

Believing Helena is dead, Bertram returns to France. But so does Diana who tells the King about Bertram's promises to her. When Bertram tries to lie his way out of it, he nearly gets them both arrested.



Finally, Helena shows up, pregnant with Bertram's child and wearing his ring, both due to her encounter with him when he believed that she was Diana. Bertram realizes his love for her, and, as Helena predicts several times throughout the play, all's well that ends well.

"If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly."

- Bertram, ACT V SC III

Study Questions and Essay Topics

Essay Topics (From Cummings Study Guides)

1. In the age of Shakespeare, it was not uncommon for a young man of high social standing to reject a woman because of her low social standing—and vice versa. How important is social status to marriageable young men and women in today's society?
2. Write an informative essay about the status of women in England or France in Shakespeare's time.
3. Which character in the play do you most admire? Which do you least admire?
4. Write a psychological profile of Bertram or Helena, focusing on salient characteristics.
5. Was Helena's method of ensnaring Bertram—the bedroom trick in which she pretends to be Diana—moral?
6. Bertram and Helena are reconciled at the end. Will their marriage last?

Study Questions:

1. Note the flood of fairy-tale motifs in this play – the King's blind promise to cure Helena's unknown wish if only she will solve his problem; the miracle cure; the riddle and the impossible quest. What do these lend to the story? How do they affect your perceptions of the characters?
2. How would the nobility of Shakespeare's day feel about Bertram marrying Helena? For a good clue, see Helena's response when asked by the Countess if she loves Bertram in ACT I. What are the conditions of her deal with the King?
3. Compare Parolles and Lafew. How are they alike and why are they initially drawn to each other in the world of the court? Why does Lafew get angry with Parolles in Act II? This is a crucial moment in the play; note how the distinction which Parolles would hide between servant and master drives this world. Who else relies on the privileges of rank in this story? How and when? What is the threat when rank is disrupted? What then does Helena represent in this world? Why are so many people of higher rank on her side? What is the ultimate fate of Parolles?
4. Bertram can be easy to vilify by the standards of our day. But consider that the same rules that he wants to employ in his standards of marital partners and which the King breaks are the very rules that preserve the power of the nobility. Can this excuse Bertram's resentment of Helena? What is Bertram like? What are his goals? What kind of judge of people is he? In Act V, he finally explains why he cannot love Helena. What is his excuse? Can we believe him? How do you know? By this point, Helena has repeated several times that "all's well that ends well." Is she right? Has Bertram simply been misled by Parolles as some characters suggest?
5. Often the plays of this era pit an older generation depicted as repressive against a younger generation that must redefine the rules and replace their elders in order to attain their reasonable and acceptable desires. How would you characterize the generations and their relationships within this play's world?

Study Questions, continued.

6. Shakespeare often considers the fragility of a woman's moral reputation within his plays. This play does this as well, but it also considers the fragility of a male character's reputation—as a nobleman, as a warrior and as a husband against that of a virtuous woman (Helena). What makes or breaks the nobleman's reputation? Where is Bertram with regard to this issue by the end of the play? What are the repercussions of his adulterous attempts to woo Diana?
7. What is the symbolism of the ring in this play? Note how many times rings get traded, and how each time they replace some other commodity – i.e. Diana gets a ring for her virginity (allegedly), the ring of Helena on Bertram's finger will equal an inescapable contract of marriage, etc. Trace all of these relationships and consider: if a ring equals all of these things, then they all must equal each other within this world. What sorts of commodities become equivalent to each other through the exchange of rings and what do these equivalencies mean?

Classroom Exercises

Exercise 1: Inflection

Understanding the meaning of *All's Well That Ends Well* beyond the bare bones of the play involves the ability to interpret subtext, which is the meaning behind the words. The following exercise (originally crafted by Paul Cartier, a teacher from Classical High School in Providence, RI) explores this area and demonstrates its relationship to vocal inflection.

1. On the chalkboard, write: "I'm glad you're here this evening."
2. Ask students what the sentence means. After a brief discussion, have six students read the line, stressing a different word each time.
3. Compare the meanings. For example: Stressing the word "I'm" may indicate that nobody else is glad you're here, while putting emphasis on "you're" implies that the others bore you.
4. Now try the same approach with *All's Well*, ACT II SCENE III: Parolles: "Ay, so say I."
5. After each new reading, encourage the class to discuss what the meaning is and to note the differences implied they stress different words.

Exercise 2: Subtext

Introduce the term "subtext" as a character's internal meaning of a line. Subtext is determined by the context of a particular situation; the character's objective in both the particular moment as well as in the larger scope of the play; and the obstacles that prevent the attainment of these goals. Note that there can be more than one valid interpretation of a particular line's subtext based on these influences.

1. Suggest that vocal inflection is a tool with which actors can convey the subtext they're trying to express. Give five students index cards with one of the following subtexts written on each one:

Exercise 2: Subtext, Continued

“How beautiful!”

“So What?”

“Look out!”

“Don’t be such a jerk.”

“I don’t believe it.”

2. Ask the students to say “Oh!” in such a way that it conveys the subtext written on their card, and ask the listeners to guess the meaning. (The same exercise can be repeated using the phrase “Good morning.” To imply “Tell me everything that happened,” “I’m in a hurry,” “I caught you!” and “I’m just being polite.”)
3. Finally ask the class to apply what they’ve learned about subtext and inflection to *All’s Well’s* ACT I SCENE III (the conversation between the Countess and Helena). Ask students to identify each character’s objective before they begin to read the lines aloud. Students should support their ideas with information given in the text. Change readers often and discuss the different possibilities that the lines and situations will support.

Exercise 3: Subtext of the voice and body

A character’s subtext or interior thoughts may be conveyed by stressing certain words, inflection, pausing and speech pacing and even body language. Applying several different scenarios to the same dialogue may illustrate this.

1. Give the following dialogue to several pairs of students:

Student 1: You’re late.
Student 2: I know. I couldn’t help it.
Student 1: Are you ready?
Student 2: Well...
Student 1: I understand.
Student 2: Is it time?
Student 1: Take this.

2. Assign a different set of characters and scenarios to each pair. Some possibilities may be spies exchanging information; siblings who have planned to run away from home; a teacher and a student who has scheduled a make-up text; the master of ceremonies and a performer backstage at a talent show.
3. Warn each pair to keep their characters and scenarios absolutely secret from everyone else, and give them 10 minutes to prepare their scene. Ask them to work at making their scenarios very clear both in the way they say their lines and the way they move.
4. Have the rest of the class watch the scenes performed. Can audience members identify each character and scenario? Discuss the clues they found in the actors’ vocal and physical presentation.

Exercise 4: Living Pictures

This exercise offers a way to clarify the relationships between characters in particular scenes by visually demonstrating them.

1. After several readings of ACT II SCENE III through the King's exit, discuss the content of the scene. Have the class list major occurrences in the story. The list might include: the conversation between Helena and her suitors, Bertram's reaction to Helena's proposal, the King's response to Bertram's rejection, the conversation between Lafew and Parolles, etc.
2. Pick two students to portray Lafew and Parolles. Let other students arrange them in poses that portray how they feel about each other. Try several different poses. Next add students for the King and Helena.
3. While the students hold their poses, have others read the scene out loud. If the class feels any part of the Living Picture doesn't reflect what is said, adjust the pose and read the lines again.
4. Pick four other students to play the 3 lords and Bertram. Pose them to show their different opinions of Helena. Try different poses, including some in which they are interested in Helena, and some where they are not. Some in which Bertram realizes she intends to choose him, and some in which he is oblivious, etc.
5. When the class is satisfied with a pose for these characters, freeze the Living Picture while students read the lines again. Poll the class to assure that they find the pose appropriate to the lines.
6. Ask students to set up Living Pictures of some of the other significant moments they listed that occur in the play. Encourage them to explain the reasons for particular choices in the poses.
7. List the plot and character elements that are most important for determining poses that work satisfactorily with the lines. Discuss the basic relationships that exist among Lafew, the King, Helena, Bertram and Parolles. Ask students to pick one character and write a description of his or her relationships to the others.