

“SOME SPORT WITH THE FOX”¹: THE LATER DATING OF *ALL’S WELL* *THAT ENDS WELL* IN RELATION TO JONSON’S *VOLPONE*

THE date of Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* has always been a source of controversy. The reasons are numerous: it did not appear in print before the 1623 Folio, there are no contemporary mentions of its staging, and it features no substantial allusions to contemporary events. Traditionally, it has been interpreted alongside the other two ‘problem plays’, *Troilus and Cressida* (entered into the Stationers’ Register in 1603), and *Measure for Measure* (performed at court in 1604). The similarity in plot with the second of these has been generally acknowledged (especially the bed-trick device), but which play preceded the other has remained a moot point until fairly recently, when a trend in criticism began to favour a later dating of *All’s Well*. In the eighties and nineties, Taylor and Wells², Snyder³, and Greenblatt⁴, among others, expressed themselves in favour of 1605 as its completion date. In the last decade, this shift forward has gained more and more consensus, mainly on the basis of an influential article by MacDonald Jackson for whom the play ‘cannot have been composed earlier than mid-1606’⁵. Wells and Taylor in the second edition of *The Complete Works* provocatively suggest 1607 as the terminal date. They place *All’s Well* after *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, and before *Pericles*. In 2012, Maguire and Smith’s suggestion

¹ William Shakespeare, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, III. vi. 98. All references to the play are to the Arden Shakespeare edition, edited by G. K. Hunter (London & New York, 1959).

² Gary Taylor & Stanley Wells, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (Oxford, 1987), 127.

³ William Shakespeare, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, edited by Susan Snyder (Oxford, 1993), 23-4.

⁴ Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Shakespeare* (London & New York, 1997), 3386.

⁵ MacDonald P. Jackson, ‘Spurio and the Date of *All’s Well That Ends Well*’, *N&Q*, xlvi (2001), 299.

of Middleton's hand in the play, promptly called into question, caused a heated exchange in the *TLS*⁶.

Quentin Skinner has recently included an appendix⁷ on this topic in his book, *Forensic Shakespeare*, revising his 2013 article in *N&Q*⁸. He delineates a brief overview of the current debate on the terminal date of Shakespeare's play and he aims to demonstrate that *All's Well* 'was almost certainly written in the latter half of 1604 or the early months of 1605'. Jackson's argument (that Shakespeare could not have invented the name 'Spurio' himself and must have borrowed it from Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, first performed in the spring of 1606, which features a character of that name⁹) can be easily disputed. However, it is not true that Jackson's article 'originated' the challenge to the earlier dating, as Skinner suggests. Barbara Everett, who concurs with him in denying a later dating¹⁰, is clear: 'For a half-century and more some academic critics have been persuaded to see some degree both of lateness and of romance in the peculiarities of *All's Well*.'¹¹

What seems to take us out of the realm of conjecture is Nick de Somogyi's often-forgotten point¹² that *All's Well* could not have been written after 27 May 1606, when parliament approved an edict '[f]or the preventing and avoyding of the great Abuse of the Holy Name of God in Stage plays'. The number of invocations of God in *All's Well* shows that its terminal date cannot be extended any further. However, the *terminus a quo* remains unknown. Although I do not have proofs such as new stylometric data to solve the play's dating, I can highlight one consequence of 1606 as the terminal date of *All's Well*. I suggest that there are affinities in tone and subject matter between Ben Jonson's

⁶ Laurie Maguire & Emma Smith, 'Many Hands – A New Shakespeare Collaboration?', *TLS* (April 19 2012), 13-5; Marcus Dahl & Brian Vickers, '*All's Well That Ends Well*: An Attribution Refuted', *TLS* (May 11, 2012), 14–5; see also at <https://cemsoxford.wordpress.com/2012/07/31/all-s-well-that-ends-well-laurie-maguire-and-emma-smith-on-the-state-of-the-debate/> (last accessed: 01.11. 2015).

⁷ Quentin Skinner, 'The date of *All's Well That Ends Well*', in *Forensic Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2014), 315-9.

⁸ Id., 'A Spurious Dating for *All's Well That Ends Well*', *N&Q*, vi.3 (2013), 429-34.

⁹ It is interesting to note though that Jackson signals that *The Revenger's Play* has been sometimes considered indebted to *Volpone* (p. 299).

¹⁰ In partial response to her article, see Byron Nelson, 'Helena and "the Rarest Argument of Wonder": *All's Well That Ends Well* and the Romance Genre', *Selected Papers of the OVSC* (2012), V, 1-12.

¹¹ Barbara Everett, 'Shakespeare's latest bed-tricks', *TLS* (30 May 2012), <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1049243.ece>, last accessed: 01.11.2015.

¹² Nick de Somogyi (ed.), *All's Well That Ends Well – All's Well, that Ends Well* (London, 2004), xxx.

Volpone and *All's Well* which become especially evident in, respectively, III. vii (Corvino offering Celia to Volpone) and II. i (Helena's arrival at the French court). To my knowledge, no scholarly work (apart from Hillman's, as we shall see) has tried to establish a direct connection between these two plays. However, similarities have been found. A number of essays have compared the treatment of healing, medical practice, and the tradition of mountebanks as mediated in the two dramatic texts. Thus, Kent R. Lehnhof¹³ compares Helena's medical performance with Corvino's fear of Celia becoming involved with charlatans, while Tanya Pollard¹⁴ probes into the relation between medical and theatrical dissimulation in *Volpone*, *Sejanus*, and *All's Well*.

W. W. Lawrence¹⁵ was perhaps too quick to identify two folktale motifs structuring the play: 'the healing of the king' and 'the fulfilling of the task'. What is not to be overlooked is that '[s]uch old folktale antecedents, however, sit cheek by jowl in *All's Well* with precise contemporary medical language and a brief but accurate glance at the range of early modern medical practice'¹⁶. In particular, this is how the King explains to Helena that he (using *pluralis majestatis*) "may not be so credulous of cure, / When our most learned doctors leave us, and / The congregated college have concluded / That labouring art can never ransom nature / From her inaidible estate' (II. i. 114-8). Now, not only is the 'congregated college' 'usually glossed as referring to the College of Physicians of London'¹⁷, but this passage has been compared by G. K. Hunter to the following one in *Volpone*: 'there they have had, / At extreme fees, the College of Physicians / Consulting on him, how they might restore him'(II. vi. 26-8)¹⁸. Barbara Howard Traister follows Hunter, pointing out that 'Ben Jonson also refers to the College of Physicians in another play set outside England'¹⁹. This alone, however, may be a chance analogy and an immaterial remark. Yet, the remedy which Mosca

¹³ Kent R. Lehnhof, 'Performing Woman: Female Theatricality in *All's Well, That Ends Well*', in Gary Waller (ed.), *All's Well, That Ends Well: New Critical Essays* (New York, 2007), 111-24.

¹⁴ Tanya Pollard, "'No Faith in Physic': Masquerades of Medicine Onstage and Off", in S. Moss and K. L. Peterson (eds.), *Disease, Diagnosis, and Cure on the Early Modern Stage* (Aldershot, 2004), 29-41.

¹⁵ W. W. Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (New York & London, 1931).

¹⁶ Barbara Howard Traister, "'Doctor She': Healing and Sex in *All's Well That Ends Well*", in R. Dutton & J. E. Howard (eds.), *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works* (Oxford, 2003), IV, 334.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ All references to *Volpone* are to the new Cambridge edition, edited by Richard Dutton (Cambridge, 2012).

¹⁹ Barbara Howard Traister, *op. cit.*, (2003), 346, n. 3.

attributes to the physicians' consultation and the Shakespearean scene have another interesting commonality.

Dutton mentions, among the few sources of *Volpone*, chap. 24 of William Caxton's *The History of Reynard the Fox* (1481) where the fox 'pretends to be dead in order to catch predatory birds, his actual victim being the crow's wife (that is, the play's *Celia*)'²⁰. However, Jonson adds another fundamental connotation to this episode. Volpone pretends to be dying and has Mosca reveal to Corvino that the only possible cure is the following practice:

[...] At last they all resolved
That, to preserve him, was no other means
But some young woman must be straight sought out,
Lusty and full of juice, to sleep by him (II. vi. 32-5)

Gordon Campbell²¹ glosses these lines as referring to 'a biblical remedy (I Kings I: 1-4)', and so does Dutton. King David, old and enfeebled, was assisted by the beautiful Abishag, the Shunamite, who would 'lie in his bosom' to warm him, although he did not have sexual intercourse with her²². Mosca tells the worried Corvino that a physician has offered his virgin daughter (60-2) and that no 'incantation [can] raise his spirit' (65). Leaping off his bed, Volpone exclaims: 'Why art thou mazed to see me thus revived? / Rather applaud thy beauty's miracle; / 'Tis thy great work, that hath, not now alone / But sundry times, raised me in several shapes' (III.vii 145-8). Let us compare the following lines in *All's Well*: the medicine's (a pun on the remedy and the female doctor) 'simple touch / Is powerful to araise King Pippen' (II. i. 74-5); Helena's incantatory couplets cause the King to exclaim 'Methinks in thee some blessed spirit doth speak / His powerful sound within an organ weak'(174-5); and so he protests to Bertram 'Thou know'st she has rais'd me from my sickly bed' (II. iii. 112) to which Bertram replies 'But follows it, my lord, to bring me down / Must answer for your raising?' (113-4). Mosca acts indeed as Volpone's pander (IV. v. 16) and so he is

²⁰ Richard Dutton, *Ben Jonson, Volpone and the Gunpowder Plot* (Cambridge, 2008), 74.

²¹ Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist and Other Plays*, edited by Gordon Campbell, Oxford Paperbacks (2008).

²² This biblical episode was common knowledge and the belief in such a practice was widespread. See for instance Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, edited by M. Jones (London, 1815), XI, 202-3.

called, while Lafew states ‘I am Cressid’s uncle’ (II. i. 96) when leaving the King and Helena alone. Finally, consider how Corvino threatens his wife if she should not comply with his desire: ‘[I will] cry thee a strumpet through the streets’ (III. vii. 98), while Helena dares venture ‘Tax of impudence / A strumpet’s boldness’ (169-70) if her cure failed.

It is not surprising then that the King’s encounter with Helena and her cure have been interpreted as a covert hint at shunamitism, the belief in the rejuvenation of an old man by sleeping with a young woman. Snyder, in her discussion of this topic, proposes that:

[t]he bodily site of the King’s fistula is not clearly defined in the text. In his own announcement it is his heart that ‘owes [i.e., owns] the malady’, though reluctant to acknowledge it. [...] But the text, through Lafew and even through Helen herself, keeps obliquely insisting that these are upward displacements of something more primitive, that the King’s mortal impairment is sexual, and that this young woman is brought in to him as Abishag was to David in the Bible, to rekindle his potency. What did not work for King David is highly successful with this later king, whose revival is expressed in sexually suggestive words and images [...] ²³

While Friedman interprets the same issue in these terms:

The King now languishes of a fistula, but the courtier Lafew describes the ailment as a form of impotence which the alluring but virtuous Helena may cure by replenishing the King’s sexual vitality²⁴.

Now, the only scholar who has directly associated the two scenes is Richard Hillman: ‘Jonson, it seems, may actually have taken Lafew’s confidence and the later pessimism of the King (Lafew’s “royal fox” II. i. 70 and 71) as a model for Volpone’s feigning despondency when Corvino offers his wife’²⁵. I would contend that the relationship between the two plays is more complex.

Helena’s miraculous cure was Shakespeare’s deliberate alteration of Boccaccio’s novella, *Giletta of Narbona*. He ‘changed his source to strengthen the intervention of heaven’²⁶. At the same time,

²³ Susan Snyder, ‘The King’s Not Here’: Displacement and Deferral in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *SQ*, xliii (Spring, 1992), 25.

²⁴ Michael D. Friedman, ‘Service is no Heritage’: Bertram and the Ideology of Procreation’ *Studies in Philology*, xcii (1995), 86.

²⁵ Richard Hillman, *William Shakespeare: The Problem Plays* (New York, 1993), 160, n. 26.

²⁶ Joseph G. Price, *The Unfortunate Comedy. A Study of All’s Well that Ends Well and its Critics* (Liverpool, 1968), 152.

several critics have connected the healing of the King to Helena's 'rejuvenating sexual appeal'²⁷ and the play's ambiguity in the cause of his rejuvenation either through Gerard de Narbonne's receipt or the administration 'by the hand of a Maid'²⁸. Although the motif of healing by touch is found in several plays, my focus is on the textual features that allow a specific comparison.

1605 and 1606 were very intense years for Ben Jonson. As Richard Dutton has brilliantly shown, *Volpone* is a text that is deeply grounded in its historical conjuncture. After the *Eastward Ho!* affair, Jonson was presumably involved in the Gunpowder Plot, and from January 1606 he was prosecuted for recusancy, the charges being heard in April. Dutton suggests that the 'writing and performance of *Volpone* followed hard upon the arraignment'²⁹: the play 'was completed late in February or early in March, in time (with rehearsals) for a first performance before 25 March'³⁰. We may well suppose the King's Men's concern: in 1604, their performance of Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall* had proved a failure and had been accused of seditiousness. Jonson's further judicial problems are bound to have worried the company as well as their resident playwright: the text of *Volpone* must have been perused and rehearsed with great attention. Jonson's play was a success and clearly impressed Shakespeare: Soellner³¹ and Jowett³² see traces of *Volpone*'s eulogy of gold in Timon's speeches³³.

Let us come to the problematic point: crudely put, 'who influenced whom'. Shunamitism is more central to *Volpone*'s plot and is only latently alluded to in *All's Well*. 1606 as terminal date for Shakespeare's play could thus invite the reversal of Hillman's judgement: scenes II.vi and III.vii of *All's Well* would then be reminiscent of *Volpone*. I think that we should not forget the synergic conditions of Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrighting. Staging new plays every few weeks, playwrights and actors could work within 'an intimate framework' of allusions and echoes, 'in the

²⁷ Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven & London, 1985), 69.

²⁸ Kent R. Lehnhof, *op. cit.* (2007), 119.

²⁹ Richard Dutton, *op. cit.* (2008), 57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Rolf Soellner, *Timon of Athens, Shakespeare's Pessimistic Tragedy* (Columbus, 1979), 202.

³² William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, edited by John Jowett, The Oxford Shakespeare e-book (2004).

³³ A source of *Timon of Athens* is the twenty-eighth 'novel' of William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* that also contains the translation of Boccaccio's Giletta (the thirty-eighth novel).

knowledge that there was an interpretative community well acquainted with others representing similar dramatic narratives and motifs'³⁴. James Tulip, while arguing for the influence of Shakespeare's tragedies in *Volpone*, goes as far as to suggest 'that Jonson had Shakespeare's actors in mind; perhaps even that they had some hand in shaping the roles after the fashion of those they knew so well in Shakespeare'³⁵.

Tulip's argument seems debatable, especially because of Ben Jonson's stance (however fluctuating and problematic) towards what has been called 'possessive authorship'³⁶. However, the fact that both plays were staged by the same company in the same period may have played a major role. I would put forward that Shakespeare, while preparing *All's Well*, read Jonson's play and, inspired by it, inserted into the play those lines I have discussed.

Volpone, disguised as the self-professed physician Scoto of Mantua, maintains that '[he] cannot endure to see the rabble of these ground *ciarlitani*, that [...] then come in lamely with *their mouldy tales out of Boccaccio*' (II. ii. 45-48, second emphasis mine). It seems plausible that in that exact time, another dramatist had begun producing similar tales. *All's Well* is a strange play which mixes bawdy humour and realism with the typical features of Shakespearean comedy alongside a new tragicomic mode. Although perhaps not yet geared towards the 'romance pattern', *All's Well* would pave the way to those 'mouldy tale[s] like *Pericles*', which would some time later be called 'Tales, Tempests and such like drolleries'.

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³⁴ Janet Clare, *Shakespeare's Stage Traffic* (Cambridge, 2014), 26.

³⁵ James Tulip, 'The Intertextualities of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*', *Sydney Studies in English*, xx (1994-5), 28. Burbage almost certainly played *Volpone*. David Grote's suggestion in *The Best Actors in the World* (Westport, 2002), 175 that Burbage also played the King in *All's Well* would be very attractive, since it would constitute a direct visual parallel, but remains an unverifiable conjecture.

³⁶ As brilliantly outlined in Joseph Loewenstein, *Ben Jonson and Possessive Authorship* (Cambridge, 2002).