Sheffield Hallam University

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HOPKINS, L. <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9512-0926>

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Marriage in Shakespeare: A Community Affair

Lisa Hopkins
Sheffield Hallam University

In his book *Family Relationships in Shakespeare and the Restoration Comedy of Manners,* Dr Sarup Singh observed that

> The distinguishing feature of Shakespeare's plays is that even when the daughter rejects the arranged marriage, she never gives us the impression of *open rebellion* against her father or of violating the sacred bond that exists between parents and children.[i]

This quality of cohesiveness in Shakespearean marriages is what I want to talk about today. In Shakespeare, the function of marriage is above all to build communities or to strengthen existing community bonds. Marriage, in Shakespeare, is far more than a transaction between individuals.

Early in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice exclaims, 'Good Lord, for alliance!'.[ii] The betrothal of Claudius and Hero has just been arranged, and Beatrice has remarked that 'My cousin tells him in his ear that he is in her heart' (II.i.290-1), to which Claudio replies, 'And so she doth, cousin' (II.i.292). What interests me about this apparently commonplace exchange is how forcibly it invites us to register not just the personal but the social function of marriage within the community of Messina. The betrothal of Claudio and Hero is only seconds old, but Beatrice is already willing to recognise Claudio as her cousin, just as later Benedick says, 'For thy part, Claudio, I did think to have beaten thee; but in that thou art like to be my kinsman, live unbruised and love my cousin' (V.iv.107-9)

.

In fact *Much Ado About Nothing* is a play in which characters are constantly being discussed in relation to their families. Leonato, hearing the news of Claudio's conduct in the wars, observes that 'He hath an uncle here in Messina will be very much glad of it' (I.i.17-18), and Don Pedro says to Hero, 'Be happy, lady; for you are like an honourable father' (I.i.103-4). It is also a community in which everyone seems to think that individual characters' marriages are communal business, as when Don Pedro declares that 'I will in the interim undertake one of Hercules' labours; which is, to bring Signior Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection, th'one with th'other' (II.i.337-9). This is not, on the face of it, anything to do with Don Pedro. Perhaps he is influenced by the fact that the war he has just had to fight has been caused by his half-brother Don John the Bastard, someone who was born out of wedlock; perhaps, though, it is just one of the many signs in the play that individal marriages are of interest to the whole community. This emphasis on the communal interest in individual marriages also, I think, goes some way towards explaining Claudio's otherwise unforgivable decision that 'If I see any thing tonight why I should not marry her, tomorrow in the congregation, where I should wed, there will I shame her' (III.ii.111-113).

This stress on the importance of marriage to the community as a whole is not confined to *Much Ado About Nothing*. *The Taming of the Shrew* is also a play in which we are constantly reminded

that individuals are part of a community. Early in the Induction, the Lord, surveying the disreputable-looking Christopher Sly, asks,

> .What think you, if he were conveyed to bed,
> Wrapped in sweet clothes, rings put upon his fingers,
> A most delicious banquet by his bed,
> And brave attendants near him when he wakes,
> Would not the beggar then forget himself?[iii]

You are what you are, it seems, only in relation to others, and certainly this play is remarkable for the number of other characters by whom its main characters are surrounded. When Petruchio and Katherine reach his home, Grumio commands, 'Call forth Nathaniel, Joseph, Nicholas, Philip, Walter, Sugarsop, and the rest' (IV.i.79-80), and Petruchio himself asks

> Where's my spaniel Troilus? Sirrah, get you hence,
> And bid my cousin Ferdinand come hither.
> One, Kate, that you must kiss and be acquainted with.
> (IV.i.136-8)

So that's six servants who are named plus 'the rest', one cousin, and one dog inhabiting Petruchio's household. We do not meet most of these characters (including, sadly, the promising-sounding spaniel Troilus), but what the mention of them does do is create an impression of people living firmly within a community.

Particularly important in this society is the rôle of fathers. When Petruchio first hears of Katherina, he says,

> I know her father, though I know not her,
> And he knew my deceasèd father well.
> (I.ii.100-1)

Later, he says to Baptista:

> You knew my father well, and in him me,
> Left solely heir to all his lands and goods
> (II.i.116-7)

Similarly, Tranio declares,

> Baptista is a noble gentleman,
> To whom my father is not all unknown
> (I.ii.237-8)

Like Beatrice acknowledging Claudio as her cousin, Petruchio after the wedding acknowledges that he has formed a relationship with Baptista as well as with Katherine when he exhorts the guests to 'Dine with my father' (III.2.195), and when he hears that Vincentio is Lucentio's father he says,

> And now by law, as well as reverend age,
> I may entitle thee my loving father.
> The sister to my wife, this gentlewoman,
> Thy son by this hath married.
> (IV.v.60-63)

Later, Lucentio begins the process of reintegrating his and Bianca's relationship back into the community after their runaway marriage by commanding,

> My fair Bianca, bid my father welcome,
> While I with self-same kindness welcome thine.

(V.ii.4-5)

I think we can find part of the explanation for this stress on community in another play to which *The Taming of the Shrew* actually appears to point us. At one point, discussing his treatment of Katherine, Petruchio says, 'This is a way to kill a wife with kindness' (IV.i.193). This comes very close to the title of Thomas Heywood's play *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, and although Heywood's play was written a little later than *The Taming of the Shrew*, I think it can still illuminate some of the assumptions the earlier play is making. In *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, the history and possessions of the Mountford family, who lie at the centre of the sub-plot, are discussed entirely in patrilineal terms. At the outset of the play, the hero, Master Frankford, has just married Anne, the sister of the local magnate Sir Francis Acton. Frankford says jovially to his new brother-in-law,

> Your sister takes not after you, Sir Francis.
> All his wild blood your father spent on you;
> He got her in his age when he grew civil.
> All his mad tricks were to his land entailed,
> And you are heir to all. Your sister, she
> Hath to her dower her mother's modesty.
>
> (i. 49-54)

Frankford figures land – and we see later in the play that possession of land is the fundamental guarantor of gentlemanly status – as essentially coterminous with the character and behaviour of the father from whom it is inherited: property and personality are transmitted together in a seamless, unbroken flow in which son exactly reproduces father. This is perhaps most tellingly imaged in the oddness of the conceit that a sister could 'take after' her brother, a turn of phrase more usually applied to parents and children – unless there is, of course, essentially no difference between brother and father, with each successive Acton exactly the same as the last. The mother's contribution to the family and its heredity, however, is funnelled exclusively to the daughter, and on the marriage of the daughter into a new family, the mother's legacy and personality thus disappear out of the main family line as quickly as they had entered it. Moreover, the mother's legacy consists exclusively in 'modesty', essentially an absence of action and performance, and the fact that it always passes only to daughters means that it constantly replicates a cycle of enacting its own disappearance from the primary patriarchal line.

Both the importance of land and its links to an exclusively paternal inheritance are further confirmed when Sir Charles, despite being reduced to desperate poverty, declines to sell the last piece of real estate remaining to him:

> O pardon me; this house successively
> Hath 'longed to me and my progenitors
> Three hundred year. My great-great-grandfather,
> He in whom first our gentle style began,
> Dwelt here, and in this ground increased this molehill
> Unto that mountain which my father left me.
> Where he the first of all our house begun,
> I now the last will end and keep this house,
> This virgin title never yet deflowered
> By any unthrift of the Mountfords' line.

(vii. 15-23)

When Sir Charles refers to his 'progenitors', it does not even need to be specified that he refers to his male ancestors only, who have transmitted the land in an unbroken chain from father to son. Women have no independent existence, as is clearly attested when Sir Francis Acton corrects himself when, speaking to Anne immediately after her marriage, he says 'By your leave, sister – by your husband's leave / I should have said' (i.6-7).

It is not only fathers that are important in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, however, but brothers too. When Wendoll, the villain of the play, first enters the Frankford household, it is to bring news of the disastrous outcome of the wager between Sir Francis and Sir Charles:

> WENDOLL Sir Francis, your wife's brother, had the worst,
> And lost the wager.
> FRANKFORD Why, the worse his chance.
> Perhaps the fortunes of some other day
> Will change his luck.
> ANNE Oh, but you hear not all.
> Sir Francis lost, and yet was loth to yield.
> In brief, the two knights grew to difference,
> From words to blows, and so to banding sides,
> Where valorous Sir Charles slew in his spleen
> Two of your brother's men
>
> (iv. 42-50)

At the beginning of this exchange, Sir Francis is the brother of Frankford's wife; by the end of it, he has become Frankford's own brother. Of course this is standard early modern English usage: relational terms are generally used loosely, with little or no distinction drawn between words like 'nephew' and 'cousin', and 'brother' is certainly more commonly used than 'brother-in-law' or even 'wife's brother'. Nevertheless, there seems to be a surprising contrast between Anne's use of 'your brother' to describe Frankford's relationship to Sir Francis and her own reference to him as 'Sir Francis'. The implication clearly seems to be that Frankford's relationship to him is in fact closer and less formal than her own, though hers is by blood and Frankford's by marriage.

Even more strikingly, the eventual alliance between Sir Francis and Susan Mountford, Sir Charles's sister, is seen solely in terms of the construction of brotherly bonds between Acton and Susan's brother Charles. Sir Francis's initial interest in Susan is based entirely on her position in the family tree of the Mountfords:

> No, no, yet I am not
> Throughly revenged. They say he hath a pretty wench
> Unto his sister: shall I in mercy sake
> To him and to his kindred, bribe the fool
> To shame herself by lewd, dishonest lust?
>
> (vii. 77-81)

Even when he has actually seen Susan and succumbed wholeheartedly to her personal charms, the resulting relationship with Sir Charles remains uppermost in Sir Francis's mind as he says first 'I seal you my dear brother, her my wife' (xiv. 146) and secondly

> Come, for our nuptials we will provide,
> Blest only in our brother and fair bride.

(xiv. 155-6)
Finally, at the news that his own sister is on her deathbed, Sir Francis proposes to Susan and Sir Charles that they should visit her, and addresses them as 'Brother, and now my wife...' (xvii. l). In all these formulations, the priority of the fraternal relationship over the wifely one is clearly expressed.

Most interesting, though, is the rôle of servants in the play. At every stage, the servants take an active interest in the affairs of their masters, and it is the servant Nick who eventually tells Master Frankford that his wife is committing adultery with his best friend. *A Woman Killed with Kindness* is often compared to *Measure for Measure*, since the Susan episodes come so close to the material of the Angelo-Isabella plot; but Bennett's comments suggest that a more appropriate comparison would in fact be with *The Taming of the Shrew*, where servants loom similarly large. In that play too, Tranio, Grumio, and the surprisingly large host of servants who people Petruchio's household prove a community bonded by service and tradition which comments on the affairs of its masters and indeed in the case of Tranio actually intervenes to arrange them. In both plays, moreover, it is notable that the servants act not in the interests of economic advantage, either for themselves or for their masters, but in pursuit of their masters' affective interests. Although both plays begin by foregrounding the importance of money, then, in each case the actions of the servants make homosociality seem important in its own right than simply for its economic function.

I have been trying to suggest, then, that although *A Woman Killed with Kindness* is less well known than Shakespeare's plays, it can help us to understand some of the cultural assumptions which underline them. Actually I think it can do this partly because of what *makes* it less well-known: it less subtle, more schematic, and slower-moving than Shakespeare is, but by the same token it spells things out more clearly. In fact I sometimes feel as if reading some of the less well-crafted Roman plays is a bit like giving my rusty Latin a rest by turning from Virgil to the Penguin classics translation: it's not so beautiful, but it's a lot easier to understand.

At the same time, though, I think *A Woman Killed with Kindness* can also help us to see what is *different* about Shakespeare, and that is his attitude to the rôle of women in marriage. It is true that, as Mary Beth Rose pointed out in a famous article on 'Where Are the Mothers in Shakespeare?',[iv] there are very few mothers in Shakespeare's plays, so we never have much sense of what kinds of thing the future may hold for his heroines. However, the reasons for that are clearly as much technical as ideological – his acting company of 10 men and 4 boys simply did not allow for the creation of parts for mothers. There is no sense that Shakespeare shares Heywood's model that all the wife brings to a marriage, apart from her male kindred, is a self-effacing modesty which replicates itself in her daughters but leaves no legacy to her sons. Shakespeare's heroines are full participants in the relationship, and the idea of what male as well as female children owe to their mothers is often remembered in the plays – in *Twelfth Night*, 'he is like my lady's eldest son, evermore tattling', while Beatrice's mother cried when she was born. It is, I think, precisely because both participants are so fully involved that marriage matters so much in Shakespeare.

This is very interestingly illustrated in a slightly later play, *Measure for Measure*. As I mentioned a moment ago, *A Woman Killed with Kindness* has similarities with *Measure for Measure* as well

as to *The Taming of the Shrew*. In both *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and *Measure for Measure*, a brother proposes to barter his sister's honour for his own freedom. When the virtuous Susan in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* asks her brother Sir Charles why, despite her poverty, he has had her dressed like a bride, he replies:

> SIR CHARLES...
> Sister, now resolve me.
> What do you think – and speak your conscience –
> Would Acton give might he enjoy your bed?
> SUSAN. He would not shrink to spend a thousand pounds
> To give the Mountfords' name so deep a wound.
> SIR CHARLES. A thousand pounds! I but five hundred owe.
> Grant him your bed; he's paid with interest so.
> (xiv.40-46)

There are less obvious similarities too. *Measure for Measure* is a play fixated on the importance of community regulation of individual marriages. It begins with a dire warning of the terrible consequences of not recognising the importance of the community's rôle in a marriage, when Claudio tells Lucio,

> Thus stands it with me: upon a true contract
> I got possession of Julietta's bed.
> You know the lady. She is fast my wife
> Save that we do denunciation lack
> Of outward order. This we came not to,
> Only for propagation of a dower
> Remaining in the coffer of her friends,
> From whom we thought it meet to hide our love
> Till time had made them for us. But it chances
> The stealth of our most mutual entertainment
> With character too gross is writ on Juliet.[v]

It is no accident that Claudio's best chance of freedom also arises from his family connections – and I don't mean Isabella, who was never likely to agree to his plan for her, but Escalus, who says, 'Alas, this gentleman, / Whom I would save, had a most noble father' (II.1.6-7). Since Escalus moves on immediately to ask Angelo if he's never done anything similar, a very delicately sketched vignette is hinted at here: Escalus not only knew Claudio's father, but, I would guess, knew him as a young man, and knows from experience that the young who, in the Renaissance mind, so often seem to threaten the community, may well mature into its stalwarts.[vi]

The cornerstone of such a change is marriage. In *Measure for Measure*, marriage is conceived of as something utterly fundamental to a human's condition, as in the following exchange:

> PROVOST Come hither, sirrah. Can you cut off a man's head?
> POMPEY If the man be a bachelor, sir, I can; but if he be a married man, he's his wife's head, and I can never cut off a woman's head.
> (IV.2.1-5)

Similarly the Duke says to Mariana, 'Why, you are nothing then. Neither maid, widow, nor wife?' (V.i.177-8). It is also notable that not only does the Duke know the whole story of Mariana and Angelo (III.1), but that Mariana should be first introduced into the story with reference to her

brother, when the Duke asks Isabella, 'Have you not heard speak of Mariana, the sister of Frederick, the great soldier who miscarried at sea?' (III.1.210-212). Identity is, in this play, radically contingent on either familial or marital status. It is, then, unsurprising that the ultimate remedy at the Duke's disposal, in his desperate attempt to shore up the flagging morale and law and order of his beleaguered state, should be marriage, the sole behaviour modification which he exacts of the slanderer Lucio. The ironic truth underlying the Duke's demand is that marriage, in this society, is not merely a personal relationship but the ultimate form of surveillance, that Foucauldian guarantor of good civic behaviour, for who will superintend the behaviour of a spouse so closely as the other spouse?

This is cerainly the case in *Romeo and Juliet*, a play wholly focused on marriage and its rôle in the community. Here, one of the few exchanges we hear between an established married couple centres entirely on the surveillance function of marriage, when Lady Capulet says to her husband,

> Ay, you have been a mouse-hunt in your time.
> But I will watch you from such watching now.[vii]

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the young couple, like Claudio and Juliet in *Measure for Measure*, initially believe they can avoid community pressures entirely in choosing to contract a marriage: 'Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized'(II.2.50) says Romeo, but the folly of his belief that social rituals can be flexible is implicitly exposed by the irreversible and unrepeatable nature of the one he chooses, baptism. I think it is no surprise that Shakespeare allows to accrue to this relationship metaphors expressive the grossest terms of his disorder his civilisation could imagine: the Friar prefigures the language of Gunpowder Plot when he declares that

> These violent delights have violent ends
> And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
> Which as they kiss consume.
> (II.6.9-11)

And Romeo evokes another potent early modern fear, that of gender instability, when he laments 'O sweet Juliet, / Thy beauty hath made me effeminate' (III.i.113-14). In contrast, Lady Capulet offers the ultimate accolade when she says of Juliet's alternative suitor Paris,

> Examine every married lineament,
> And see how one another lends content.
> (I.iii.84-5)

Marriage in this play has at least the potential to provide the calming influence so much needed in the violent society of Verona, as is seen in the first words spoken by Lady Capulet and Lady Montague to their respective husbands: 'A crutch, a crutch! Why call you for a sword?' (I.i.76) and 'Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe' (I.i.80-1), both wives here are clearly agents of peace and calm. Marriage also creates ties which reach far beyond the individuals involved: the Nurse tells Juliet,

> Thou wast the prettiest babe that e'er I nursed.
> An I might live to see thee married once,
> I have my wish.
> (I.iii.61-3)

The Nurse is an old woman now. It is clear from speeches elsewhere in the play that she is a widow, and the only child of her own whom we hear her mention, Susan, is also dead. Nevertheless, the prospect of the marriage of her foster-daughter Juliet still gives her a foothold within the community and a link to the future. Equally both the Nurse and Lady Capulet clearly

reveal their vested stake in the marriages of others as well as themselves in the following exchange:

> Tell me, daughter Juliet,
> How stands your disposition to be married?
> JULIET
> It is an honour that I dream not of.
> NURSE
> An honour! Were not I thine only nurse,
> I would say thou hadst sucked wisdom from thy teat.
> (I.iii.65-69)

Finally, it is language drawn from marriage arrangements which, even though no actual marriage is now possible, is used to signal the dawning of peace when Capulet says,

> O brother Montague, give me thy hand.
> This is my daughter's jointure, for no more
> Can I demand.
> (V.iii.296-8)

In *Romeo and Juliet*, then, we see that marriage is far more than an affair between two individuals: it is the fundamental building-block of which a community is made.

A play which clearly looks back at *Romeo and Juliet* is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its reference to a chorus of eight and six, its close parody of the Romeo and Juliet story in the Pyramus and Thisbe scenes, and the way in which the play directly pits parents' rights against children's. Here too we find an emphasis on the ways marriage impacts on a whole community: the dissension of Oberon and Titania causes climate change; Oberon intervenes to help Helena (and sometimes in production Hippolyta often silently tries to exert pressure on Theseus to help Hermia, as in the Michael Hoffman film); and both Lysander and Theseus know about Demetrius's previous courting of Helena.[viii] The proper functioning of marriage here too, then, is an essential element for the harmony of the community as a whole.

It is true that we are also made aware in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* of the tensions which marriage can generate for individuals, particularly that between love and friendship. This is clearly seen when Theseus defines love as being directly at odds with reality:

> Lovers and Madmen have such seething Brains,
> Such shaping Phantasies, that apprehend
> More than cool Reason ever comprehends.
> (V.i.4-6)

Equally, Helena laments to her erstwhile best friend,

> We, Hermia, like two Artificial Gods,
> Have with our Needles created both one Flower,
> Both on one Sampler, sitting on one Cushion,
> Both warbling of one Song, both in one Key:
> As if our Hands, our Sides, Voices, and Minds
> Had been incoporate. So we grew together,
> Like to a Double Cherry: seeming Parted,
> But yet an Union in Partition,
> Two lovely Berries moulded on one Stem.

So with two seeming Bodies but one Heart,
Two of the first Life-coats in Heraldry,
Due but to one, and crowned with one Crest.
And will you rent our auncient Love asunder
To join with Men in scorning your poor Friend?
(III.ii.203-16)

In the 'sequel' to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which Shakespeare co-wrote towards the end of his career with John Fletcher, this note is going to be even more strongly sounded: *The Two Noble Kinsmen* essentially picks up where *A Midsummer Night's Dream* left off, at the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, and Hippolyta's sister Emilia laments her childhood friend, whose love, she says, she values far more than she ever could that of a man, while the two erstwhile best friends, Palamon and Arcite, instantly become enemies when both fall in love with Emilia.

However, it is also clear in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that not marrying is not the answer. The life of a nun is painted by Theseus in the bleakest of terms, and it is notable that Theseus figures the block to his own desires in terms of an older woman who has either never been married or is no longer so:

But O, me thinks, how slow
This Old Moon wanes: she lingers my Desires
Like to a Stepdame or a Dowager,
Long withering out a Young Man's Revenue.
(I.i.3-6)

Throughout the play, indeed, it is repeatedly hinted that the unmarried state of Queen Elizabeth is a threat to the whole community, since *A Midsunner Night's Dream* can, I think, be read as one of the earliest of the plays in which Shakespeare registers his growing unease at the posibility of a looming succession crisis when the childless and rapidly ageing queen should finally die.

The play which registers most strongly the potential cost of marriage to the individual is *All's Well That Ends Well*, which will be my last example. It may seem a strange decision to have chosen to end on such an odd, downbeat play, but I think firstly that *All's Well* is severely underappreciated and misunderstood, and secondly that it can help us grasp something very important about Shakespeare's understanding of marriage.

We often do not see that *All's Well* is fundamentally about marriage because we so often experience it in the theatre as the vehicle for the retirement of a great actress. The Countess in *All's Well* is traditionally the rôle which great Shakespearean leading ladies choose for their farewell to the stage, as in the legendary RSC production with Dame Judi Dench as the Countess. Nevertheless, *All's Well* is the play in which we see most clearly the implications of the fact that at the heart of Renaissance marriage lay sex, and that the standard Renaissance term for having sex was knowing. 'Do you know this woman? – Carnally, she says', goes the exchange in *Measure for Measure*. Moreover, knowing in the carnal sense is often figured in Renaissance plays as leading to other kinds of knowing too, as in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, where the deflowering of the heroine Beatrice-Joanna instantly changes her into a much more streetwise person.

In this context, I think it is notable that what Bertram ultimately promises with respect to Helena, whom he has been trying to get rid of for most of the play, is that 'If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly'.[ix] Initially, Bertram crudely dismissed Helena on the grounds that 'I know her well', with a clear sexual slur; now, he finds that he does *not* know her, nor indeed very much else. I think he can be seen here as recognising in Helena someone who can teach him the things which he has finally learned that he needs to know.

This is, I think, underlined by the fact that *All's Well That Ends Well* is unique among the so-called 'problem plays' in that the other two which are generally so classed, *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, are both clearly focused on the present. *Measure for Measure*, with its portrayal of a shy, publicity-avoiding ruler who wishes to suppress brothels, is obviously a reflection on James VI and I; *Troilus and Cressida*, with its emphasis on the cult of chivalry, has been just as inistently read as a reflection on the Earl of Essex. By contrast, *All's Well That Ends Well* looks consistently to the past; but, I shall argue, it does so only in order to make a suggestion about the future. Indeed, its very title suggests a teleological and future-oriented perspective, and this proves to be abundantly borne out by the events of the play.

I think this is because the ideological heart of *All's Well That Ends Well* is in a recent past – that of the French wars of religion between the Huguenots and Catholics – whose troubles, I want to argue, it thinks it can transcend by reference to a past still further back, in ways that will allow hope for the future, and for which marriage proves a potent metaphor. Thus the king's greeting to Bertram, 'Welcome to Paris' (I.2.22), not only inaugurates a complex series of allusions in which Bertram will actually *be* Paris, making the Judgement of Paris between the resonantly-named Diana and Helena, but also announces a geographical location. Moreover, though a classical model may be so strongly invoked by the names of Diana and Helena, we are never allowed to forget the Frenchness of the setting either. The motif of a doctor's daughter and a sexually wounded king so closely recalls the marriage between Catherine de' Medici (whose name meant literally 'of the doctors') and Henri II of France, who were unable to produce offspring for the first ten years of their marriage until the king had an operation on his foreskin, while the sly link between the king's fistula and 'The fundamental reason of this war', which 'hath much blood let forth' (III.1.2-3), pokes fun at the French wars of religion and their complex interrelationships with questions of marriage and procreation. The St Bartholomew's Day Massacre directly followed on the wedding of Henri of Navarre and Marguerite of France, daughter of Catherine de' Medici, and the entire question was made increasingly more urgent by the successive failures of Charles IX and Henri III, Catherine's sons, to beget legitimate heirs to the crown).

For once, Shakespeare's representation of his geographical setting should, I think, therefore be treated as reliable in *All's Well That Ends Well*: the ideological centre of this play is in France, and above all the France of the Wars of Religion, but also a France seen as fundamentally constituted by its profound awareness of its classical heritage, for France as well as England told itself stories about the *translatio imperii* and descent from exiled Trojan heroes. Shakespeare himself lodged with a family of Huguenot refugees, the Mountjoys (interestingly, we know this because of a lawsuit to do with a marriage), and would have been well aware of the religious turmoil across the channel. A dominant participant in these wars had been Queen Catherine de' Medici, and *All's Well That Ends Well* certainly seems to remember this, for there are many analogues in the play with the history of the Medicis: the King's apparently sexual dysfunction is

the most obvious of these, but there is a historically correct reference to ‘our cousin Austria’ (I.ii.5), and it may also be significant that Catherine de’ Medici’s mother had been called Madeleine, the name which is, uniquely in Shakespeare, conferred on Lafew’s daughter. In this play, then, Shakespeare for once knows not only who his main characters are, but what their marital alliances were.

As well as the comments about wars in Italy, however, *All’s Well That Ends Well* also contains much evidence of the strife and paranoia produced by religious uncertainty in general. Above all, the play draws our attention to the splitting of Christendom effected by schism, and suggests that it can only by healed by marriage, for *All’s Well That Ends Well* offers a fantasy rewriting of the disastrous wedding of the Catholic French princess Marguerite de Valois to the Huguenot Henri of Navarre which precipitated the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. *All’s Well* offers imagings of reconciliation rather than of strife between conflicting religious positions. The Clown, for instance, says that ‘young Charbon the puritan and old Poysam the papist, howsome’er their hearts are severed in religion, their heads are both one: they may jowl horns together like any deer i’th’herd’ (I.iii.51-5); the potential of religious strife is subsumed in the culturally highly valorised discourse of the pastoral, which allows for language to operate symbolically rather than precisely. There may have been trouble between the two confessions in the past, as seen most recently and devastatingly in the French Wars of Religion, but it is not too late to hope for better in the future, because, after all, all’s well that ends well, as long as there is a marriage to make it so, and to bring cohesion to the community as a whole.

Notes

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[i] Sarup Singh, Family Relationships in Shakespeare and the Restoration Comedy of Manners (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 49.

[ii] William Shakespeare, Much Ado About Nothing, edited by R. A. Foakes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), II.i.293. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

[iii] William Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew, edited by G. R. Hibbard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), Induction 1, 35-9. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

[iv] Mary Beth Rose, ‘Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare? Options for Gender Representation in the English Renaissance’, Shakespeare Quarterly 43.3 (Fall 1991): 291-314.

[v] William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, edited by J. M. Nosworthy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), I.2.144-54. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

[vi] See for instance David Herlihy, ‘Some Psychological and Social Roots of Violence in the Tuscan Cities’, in Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200-1500, edited by Lauro Martines (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 129-154, pp. 140-1 on the rôle of young men, especially those who were unmarried, in precipitating violence.

[vii] William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, edited by T. J. B. Spencer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), IV.iv.11-12. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

[viii] William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream, edited by John F. Andrews (London: J. M. Dent, 1989), I.i.106-112. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

[ix] William Shakespeare, All's Well That Ends Well, edited by Barbara Everett. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), V.iii.309-10. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.