EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

‘The Sweet Marjoram of the Salad’: Abortifacient Plants and the Shakespearean Bed Trick

Will Steffen
Independent Scholar

In the first book-length study of the bed trick trope on the English stage, Marliss Desens analyses the convention in forty-four extant early modern English plays in order to understand how the trope was used and, perhaps more importantly, why it became so popular as a theatrical device. It’s a good question. After all, the bed trick was a popular convention of comedy that audiences enjoyed despite the sexual violations it staged.[1] The trope has endured in popular cinema, appearing in recent dramatic features such as *What Happened to Monday?* (2017). Desens’ study complicates the popular notion in criticism

[1] I follow Marliss Desens in identifying the bed trick as rape, though I also acknowledge the presentist implications of this controversial claim. From a legal and historical standpoint, the suggestion that a woman could rape a man in early modern England (let alone her own husband) is absurd. In seventeenth-century England, rape was defined by: (1) the act of penetration; (2) without a woman’s consent ; and (3) required corroboration ‘to protect men from false accusation’. Furthermore, the burden of proof lay entirely with the female victim; the ‘wretched paradox’ of reporting a rape in early modern England was that it required a woman to represent ‘a sexual act in which female submission was absent’ in a context where a woman’s consent was almost always implied. While men did represent women as sexually aggressive and framed themselves as victims of feminine conspiracy or traps, it was only in a legal context of denying a rape accusation that they did so. Garthine Walker’s study of a hundred legal cases of rape from the seventeenth century makes no mention of men accusing women. Kirsten Mendoza suggests that scholars are usually silent about acts of ‘sex-by-deception committed by a female character’ because of ‘conflicting legal approaches to male rape and cases in which the plaintiff’s consent was induced through artifice’. She then cites an 1872 California law which ‘defined sex achieved through impersonation as rape only when the victim is married and the perpetrator of the crime is not the victim’s spouse’. By this nineteenth-century definition, Helena’s bed trick does not constitute rape because she is already married to Bertram. See Marliss Desens, *The Bed-Trick in English Renaissance Drama: Explorations in Gender, Sexuality, and Power* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994); Garthine Walker, ‘Rereading Rape and Sexual Violence in Early Modern England’, *Gender and History* 10.1 (1998), 1-25 (pp. 3, 6, 15); Kirsten N. Mendoza, ‘“Thou maiest inforce my body but not mee”: Racializing Consent in John Marston’s *The Wonder of Women*’, *Renaissance Drama* 49. 1 (2021), 29-55 (p. 50).

that women and wives are the ones primarily arranging bed tricks in order to deceive their husbands; in fact, Desens shows that sixty percent of bed tricks are actually arranged by men, and 'are aimed at fulfilling those characters' own sexual desires'.[2] If there is something comic about bed tricks, it seems to be most often happening at the woman's expense. When women *do* arrange bed tricks in early modern plays – in *All's Well That Ends Well* (ca. 1603),[3] for example – they are often prevented from possessing too much sexual agency over their husbands; their manipulation over their spouse is temporary, they tend to share in their husband's sexual humiliation, and, in comedy, the husband need not accept responsibility for his attempted infidelities.[4] The uncomfortable comedic element of the bed trick likely earned *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* their designation among the 'problem plays' by an early twentieth-century Shakespearean critic, who found that in their final scene, 'our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain'.[5] *All's Well* ends with Bertram promising to love Helena 'dearly, ever, ever dearly' (5.3.310) after he spends the entire play trying to avoid his betrothed. If by some chance his affections about his wife have sincerely transformed, that shift might still owe something to the fact that he thought he was sleeping with someone else in the dark. But Desens may also be over-simplifying the patriarchal frameworks within which Shakespeare heroines are operating. Desens overlooks, for example, the specialized knowledge women seem to possess, especially in *All's Well That Ends Well,* about certain plants and their abortifacient qualities.

All's Well features a bed trick and also references a number of plants whose abortifacient qualities were well known to early modern botanists, apothecaries, herbalists, and women. These plants include iris, rue (or Herb of Grace), and sweet marjoram.

---

[2] Desens, p. 17.

[3] Emma Smith and Laurie Maguire have recently suggested that *All's Well That Ends Well* was written later than 1604, as previously thought. They also suggest Shakespeare's problem play was one of several collaborations between Shakespeare and Middleton. See 'Shakespeare's Co-Author Revealed', *Times Literary Supplement,* 20 Apr. 2012, https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2012-04-25-shakespeares-co-author-revealed

[4] Desens, p. 61.

[5] Frederick S. Boas, *Shakespeare and His Predecessors,* (New York: C. Scribner & Sons, 1896), p. 345. https://archive.org/details/shakespearehispr00boasuoft/page/n3/mode/2up

Other scholars are quick to identify other 'problems' with this play. Kimberly Anne Coles suggests that the play's problem is that racialized hierarchies of blood overshadow hierarchies of merit. And even though 'women provide the remedy to the problems of the play', her reading seems to overlook the ending of the play, where a deserving Helena must settle for an ungrateful Bertram, which is much less than she deserves. See Kimberly Anne Coles, '"Confound[ing] distinction": Women and the Disruption of Race in *All's Well that Ends Well*', *Shakespeare Studies* 50.1 (2022), 44-53 (p. 51).

Pomegranates and saffron also had associations with birth control, if not abortion.[6] In what follows, I hope to suggest that a stronger understanding of early modern abortifacients can help to resolve some of the unresolvable 'problems' of *All's Well That Ends Well.* Whereas some feminist scholars of *All's Well* are deeply uncomfortable with the play's denouement in which Helena's resurrection, bed trick, and pregnancy announcement seem to secure the incredulous love of an unconsenting husband, I contend that Helena possesses the desire, the knowledge, and the means to fake her pregnancy in order to possess what she, the daughter of a poor physician, really wants: financial stability through social mobility. Helena's reasons for wanting to avoid pregnancy with her disappointing choice of a husband might include the threat of plague and the ongoing wars in Italy. But Helena also possesses a working knowledge of plants capable of curing fistulae and manipulating menstruation. Helena's alliance with the Countess (her mother-in-law), a woman who hints at her own experience with miscarriage and abortion, also demonstrates that her knowledge of plants and their medicinal functions was, like the ancient writings of Dioscorides or the contemporary writings of John Gerard or Nicholas Culpepper, inextricably linked to gynecology. Helena's real trick, I suggest, is devising a way to access financial security within a patriarchal framework from where she may enjoy sex without the obligation of procreation. In the context of early modern English abortion laws, Helena's marriage to Bertram helps her to avoid suspicion from the courts, which were only interested in prosecuting abortions carried out by unmarried women. And in the context of the post-*Roe* United States, Helena's manipulation of her menstrual cycle has important implications for contemporary stagings. What does it mean to be 'well' at the end of *All's Well?*

Early Modern Abortion Laws

Helena's knowledge of abortifacient plants is subverted in *All's Well* with good reason. While herbals and midwifery books that discussed the abortifacient function of certain plants were widely available in early modern London and Europe more broadly, the consequences of performing an abortion were potentially dire. Under the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina,* which established a new set of laws in the Holy Roman Empire beginning in 1532, those found guilty of infanticide and abortion alike could be punished

[6] John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 26; John M. Riddle, *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 151.

by burial and impalement or by being torn by hot pincers and then drowned.[7] While these harsh punishments may have served as a strong deterrent, the fact remains that abortions were difficult to prosecute because 'it was a crime that often left very little evidence, and it was also a crime that was inconsistently defined, if classified as a crime at all'.[8]

The amount of printed information available about how to perform abortions suggests that they were a viable option for many women in London. Although the main evidence we have of abortions that occurred in early modern England comes from the few that were prosecuted in the courts, it is likely that many women had them secretly and successfully escaped legal consequences. At the same time, the proliferation of bastards in London at the turn of the seventeenth century is also evidence that many poor women either did not have access to abortions or else chose to carry their children to term. This bastard boom is the subject of another Shakespearean 'problem play' that makes use of a bed trick, *Measure for Measure*, which is set in a different European city where the number of illegitimate children and unwed mothers reaches a point of crisis. The play begins in a legal context where the state of Vienna – and the new interim Duke Angelo specifically – is beginning to crack down on illicit forms of sex and the spike in illegitimate children by closing the brothels and instituting harsh new capital punishments for getting children out of wedlock. Lucio admits he has 'purchased as many diseases under [Mistress Overdone's] roof as come to… three thousand dolors a year' (1.2.45-50). Claudio is arrested for the 'getting of Madam Julietta with child' (1.2.74) at the same time that Mistress Overdone learns that, under Angelo's new leadership, 'all the houses [brothels] in the suburbs must be plucked down' (1.2.98-9). The English also issued laws at the turn of the seventeenth century aimed to curb the production of illegitimate heirs, which peaked between 1590 and 1610.[9] Some of those laws, like the long-dormant laws of Angelo's Vienna, targeted men, and punished fathers for impregnating unmarried women. In 1610, for example, it became a felony for a man to desert his family. But other English laws also targeted poor, unmarried, vagrant women and sex workers. The 'Poor Law' of 1576, which criminalized attempts to abandon children to the clergy, and a 1609 law aimed at 'Rogues Vagabonde and Sturdye Beggars and Other Lewde and Idle Persons' had greater legal implications for women.[10] Unlike Helena's ambiguous pregnancy, which is confirmed by Diana's say-so alone, Claudio seems doomed by

[7] Margaret Brannan Lewis, *Infanticide and Abortion in Early Modern Germany* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

[8] Ibid, p. 20.

[9] Spivack, 'To "Bring Down the Flowers": The Cultural Context of Abortion Law in Early Modern England', *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 14.1, 107-51 (p. 114).

[10] Ibid, 114-15.

Julietta's baby bump. On his way to prison, where he will await execution, Claudio laments that 'the stealth of our most mutual entertainment / With character too gross is writ on Juliet' (1.2.157-8).

But what was 'writ' about abortion in a sixteenth-century legal context? When discussing 'abortion' from an early modern perspective, it is important to clarify how the term differs from modern usage. According to Spivack, 'abortion' denoted in the early modern period a late-term fetal death. Abortion could be either accidental or intentional, and though it was generally identified as something to be avoided, it was also not regarded as homicide. But abortion was also distinct from the term 'miscarriage', which generally referred to an early-term fetal death, 'intentional or not'.[11] Furthermore, unlike the claims central to modern legal discourse around abortion regarding the moment when 'life' begins, the consensus in the early modern period was that a fetus was not really human or even alive before quickening – or before the mother could feel the baby kicking.[12] In a time when a woman's menstrual cycle could be disrupted by any number of dietary or environmental factors, it makes sense that waiting until the moment the mother could feel the fetus kick, confirming the pregnancy, would also be identified as the moment of ensoulment or of real personhood.[13] Thus, Spivack argues, 'prescriptions for inducing one's menstrual cycle or "bringing down the courses", though commonly understood to induce miscarriages, were not, except in rare instances… censored or condemned. Early self-induced disruptions of pregnancy did not register as fetal murder'.[14] Spivack even speculates that the distinction between inducing menstruation with the help of abortifacients and deliberately causing a miscarriage in the months before quickening 'was seen as so minimal as not to warrant discussion'.[15] In short, though women were sometimes deemed responsible for inducing fetal deaths, these instances were difficult to distinguish from accidental miscarriages, which were common, and added to the difficulty of prosecuting abortions. The courts were far more concerned with instances of infanticide, or the murder of a child who had already been born.[16]

Laws about abortion in England were similar to the laws upheld in Europe by the *Carolina* because they both targeted poor and unwed women. The infanticide statute of 1624 stands

[11] Ibid, 112-13.

[12] Ibid, 120. Before the moment of quickening, there was always the risk that the fetus was something else—a monster, a 'false Mole', or a 'dead lump[] of flesh' (126).

[13] Ibid, 124-6.

[14] Ibid, 120-1.

[15] Ibid, 123.

[16] Ibid, 132.

out in Spivack's survey of early modern legal discourse surrounding fetal deaths for two reasons. Not only does the *Acte to p'vent the murthering of Bastard Children* target young unmarried women as the likely perpetrators of such a crime; it also highlights, even in its title, how marriage was a means of evading detection or even suspicion of infanticide. The statute specifically targets 'many lewd Women that have been delivered of Bastard Children' who 'doe secretlie bury, or conceale the Death, of their Children'. It asserts that 'if the Child be found dead the said Women do alleadge that the said Childe was borne dead; whereas it falleth out sometymes (although hardlie is it to be proved) that the said Child or Children were murthered by the said Women their lewd Mothers'.[17] At the same time, it suggests that a woman who terminates the lawful pregnancy of a *legitimate* child, who is *not* 'by the Lawes of this Realme… a Bastard', with a husband by her side would not be subject to the same suspicion. But this statute also defines the victim of the crime as being a child 'born alive', and does not therefore speak to the deliberate termination of a fetus.[18]

This is not to say that there were not instances where terminating a fetus was determined to be homicide in the early modern period. In early 2022, Chief Justice Samuel Alito drew criticism for his citation of Judge Henry de Bracton's *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae* in his leaked draft decision of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*.[19] Bracton was writing at the beginning of the thirteenth century and was the first to identify abortion as homicide in legal writing. However, as historians Karl Shoemaker, Mireille Pardon, and Sara McDougall have pointed out, Alito is wrong to suggest that de Bracton's writing is evidence of a tradition of 'prosecuting post-quickening abortions as felonies at common law in the medieval period'.[20] De Bracton's ruling seems to be an exceptional

---

[17] Ibid, 132. *Acte to P'vent the Murthering of Bastard Children 1623-1624*, 21 Jac., c. 27 (Eng.).

[18] Spivack, 132.

[19] Heather Digby Parton, 'Samuel Alito's Use of Ancient Misogyny: SCOTUS Rewinds to Centuries-Old Common Law for Abortion Ban', *Salon*. 11 May 2022. https://www.salon.com/2022/05/11/samuel-alitos-use-of-ancient-misogyny-scotus-rewinds-to-centuries-old-common-law-for-abortion-ban/
Spivack also quotes from Sir Matthew Hale, another early commentator on abortion writing from the se venteenth century (who Alito also cites in his *Dobbs* decision) to show disagreement with Bracton. Hale contended that a child must already be born *in rerum natura* in order for their intentional death to be considered murder. A woman taking a 'potion to kill' her fetus is simply 'a great misprision, but no Felony' in Hale's estimation. (quoted in Spivack, 134). See also: Bess Levin, 'Samuel Alito's Antiabortion Inspiration: A 17th-Century Jurist Who Supported Marital Rape and Had Women Executed', *Vanity Fair*, 3 May 2022. https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/05/samuel-alito-roe-v-wade-abortion-draft

[20] Karl Shoemaker et al. '"Abortion Was a Crime"? Three Medievalists Respond to "English cases dating all the way back to the 13th century corroborate the treatises' statements that abortion was a crime", *Law & History Review*, 2024.

case where an abortion was ruled a homicide, but it should not be understood as an established legal precedent.

Considering the alternatives, abortions may have been worth the risk for many poor and unwed women whose livelihoods depended on their ability to work. Poor unwed women were often limited to working in domestic settings where they were at constant risk of sexual exploitation by their male employers.[21] If a woman was raped, it was almost impossible for women to prove it, especially considering that the conception was seen as evidence of pleasurable and therefore consensual sex.[22] Furthermore the discovery of a pregnancy could mean the immediate termination of a woman's employment.[23]

On the surface, it would appear as though abortion cannot exist in Angelo's Vienna, where women are either pregnant or not pregnant, and where men are either condemned or innocent. But the pregnant female body proves to be a slippery signifier of illicit sex, which in turn underscores the slippery nature of the law. The legal loopholes of Angelo's Vienna – where the condemned Barnardine is too hung over to be hanged (4.3.56), where Ragozine's head stands in for Claudio's (4.3.70), and where Angelo is nearly condemned by the same law he seeks to uphold (5.1.417) – echo the hypocrisy inherent in the enforcement of English laws that were meant to curb the proliferation of bastards. Many of the bills proposed to combat adultery and bastardy in early modern England failed due to concerns that aristocrats might be subjected to the same laws that targeted the poor.[24]

Bed Tricks and Abortifacients in the Ancient World

Helena's pregnancy occurs in a legal and historical context where her options are dependent on her socioeconomic and marriage status. But her knowledge of plants is also part of a rich historical and literary history. Shakespeare's use of the bed trick in *All's Well* likely traces the convention from a specific classical lineage where abortifacient plants feature prominently in stories of unwanted pregnancies. While the trope was popular throughout the medieval period, appearing in the works of Chaucer and Boccaccio among others, bed tricks were also a staple of the ancient world, even if their

[21] Lewis, p. 30.

[22] Garthine Walker, 'Rereading Rape and Sexual Violence in Early Modern England', *Gender and History* 10.1 (1998), 6-8.

[23] Lewis, p. 31.

[24] Spivack, 114.

function was not always comedic.[25] In book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, Myrrha confronts the despair of being hopelessly in love with her own father, Cinyras. 'For every other living wyght dame nature dooth permit / To match without offence of sin. The Heifer thinkes no shame / To beare her father on her backe' (10.359-361), Myrrha laments to herself, trying to understand why animals are permitted the joys of incest while she is not.[26] Myrrha concludes that suicide is her best recourse. But she is prevented from killing herself by a faithful nurse, who agrees to organize a bed trick that will allow her to consummate her lust for her father while her dear old dad is kept quite literally in the dark. After several anonymous sexual encounters, Cinyras finally discovers to his horror that his mystery lover is his own daughter. Myrrha, now pregnant with her father's child, flees her father's wrath and kingdom and begs to be transformed to atone for her incest. She becomes a myrrh tree, and then gives birth to a child: Adonis. Myrrh, as Ovid well knew, was an abortifacient used throughout the ancient world. First-century Greek physician and botanist Dioscorides is even explicit about its abortifacient functions: 'It soothes and opens the closed vulva, and it expels the menstrual flow *and birth* speedily applied with wormwood, a dilution of lupins or juice from rue'.[27] Thus, Ovid's version of the myth provides a cautionary tale and underscores the pragmatic function of myrrh in offering means and access to an abortion, especially in cases of incest.[28] Myrrh – and other easily accessible natural materials that flourished throughout ancient and early modern Europe and Asia, such as rue, Queen Anne's Lace, pennyroyal, and silphium – would be commonly associated with women's reproductive health for centuries.

John Riddle points to other examples from Ovid too. The story of Persephone and Demeter, for example, similarly highlights the abortifacient function of pomegranates popular in the ancient world.[29] The metamorphosis of Daphne into the Laurel tree can

---

[25] Wendy Doniger, Carol Neely, and David McCandless have registered the cathartic and restorative function of the bed trick in *All's Well*, where Bertram finally consents to 'actualizing [Helena's] fantasy', and where, vice versa, she consents to enact his. See: Wendy Doniger, *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 84; Neely, qtd. in Doninger, p. 84; David McCandless, 'Helena's Bed-trick: Gender and Performance in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45.4 (1994), 449-68 (p. 466).

[26] W.H.D. Rouse and D. Litt (eds), *Shakespeare's Ovid: Being Arthur Golding's Translation of the* Metamorphoses, (London: De La More Press, 1904).
https://sourcetext.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/golding_ovid.pdf

[27] Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, trans. by Tess Osbaldeston and R. Wood, (Johannesburg: Ibidis Press, 2000), p. 78.

[28] See: John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World the Renaissance*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 58.

[29] Riddle, p. 26.

also be read as having a pragmatic moral, since laurel was also a popular abortifacient of the ancient world, and might have been used following a rape like the one Daphne narrowly escapes.[30]

Myrtle is another abortifacient plant with close associations to a bed trick in *The Metamorphoses.* Golding's translation of Ovid mentions myrtle only twice. It is among the species of trees that gather to give Orpheus an audience at the beginning of book 10. In book 11, 'There is a grove of Myrtle trees' in the spot where Peleus rapes Thetis to conceive Achilles (XI. 267). Much like Ovid's origin myths of laurel and myrrh (abortifacients that are manufactured by bed tricks, rape, or the narrow avoidance of rape), myrtle seems inextricably linked to sexual violence. Thetis, a water nymph with the power to shape shift, puts up a strong defense as Peleus 'beginnes / To offer force' (XI. 274-5). She performs a different kind of bed trick as she transforms into a 'bird', a 'massye log', and a 'speckled Tyger' to avoid penetration (XI. 277-279). Frustrated, Peleus seeks assistance from Proteus, who advises him:

> Alonely when shee lyes asleepe within her pleasant Cave,
> Cast grinnes to trappe her unbewares: hold fast with snarling knot:
> And thought shee fayne a hundredth shapes, deceive thee let her not.
> (XI. 286-8).

Peleus is eventually successful in his pursuit, and 'with the great Achylles did her fill' (XI. 302). Though myrtle does not undergo a metamorphosis in the same way that Daphne and Myrrha do, its proximity to rape in Ovid's narrative calls attention to its use-value as an abortifacient. Myrtle has been characterized as an emmenagogue and an abortifacient by Dioscorides and Soranus.[31] Gerard uses a peculiar euphemism to identify the same characteristic, noting that myrtle leaves will 'stay the spitting of bloud, and all other issues thereof: they stop both the whites and the reds in women, if they sit in a bath made therewith'.[32]

---

[30] Dioscorides, p. 106.

[31] Riddle, pp. 26-27; Dioscorides, p. 22. Riddle quotes the following recipe from Soranus for an oral medicine that will 'not only prevent conception…but also destroy any already existing': '… the seeds of leukoion [Matthiola incana L. or Cheiranthus chieri L.] and myrtle [Myrus communis L.], three obols each [=.5 drachma]; of myrrh [Commiphora myrrha], a drachma [6 obols=1 drachma = 4.3 g or .15 oz]; of white pepper [Piper nigrum L.], two [seedpods]; give to drink with wine for three days' (pp. 26-7).

[32] Gerard, p. 1413.

Shakespeare underscores myrtle's association with sexual power dynamics in one of his most Ovid-adjacent works, *Venus and Adonis*. In Shakespeare's epic love poem, just before she discovers his mortal wound, Venus expects to find Adonis in a 'myrtle grove' (865). Poem XI of *The Passionate Pilgrim* also features a 'myrtle shade' as the preferred location for Venus to 'woo' Adonis, and to '[seize] on [his] lips' before 'away he skips'.[33] Though Ovid doesn't mention a myrtle grove in his retelling of the Venus and Adonis story, John Gerard mentions that 'The Myrtle tree was in times past consecrated to *Venus*. *Pliny* in his 15. Booke, 29. chapter, saith thus, There was an old Alter belonging to *Venus,* which they now call *Murtia*'.[34] Shakespeare is clearly familiar with the power dynamics associated with these plants in his revisions of Ovidian myths. And much like his Roman predecessor, Shakespeare also emphasizes the use-value of abortifacient plants. In a comedy like *All's Well,* where the play's problems center on the female body, abortifacient plants have the potential to facilitate a comic resolution to an otherwise generically anomalous play.

'Those that were enwombed mine': Abortifacients in *All's Well That Ends Well*

The critical discussion surrounding Helena in *All's Well* is divided between those who see her operating safely within a patriarchal status quo, and those who suggest her agency affords her the means and mobility to circumvent male authority. On the one hand, Desens is right to suggest that the bed trick in *All's Well* limits Helena's scheme to a 'lawful' framework that doesn't seek to subvert or interrogate its boundaries: 'Helena's power is safely limited by the patriarchal society in which she lives'.[35] David McCandless suggests that the play interrogates gender roles through staging a complex 'erotic subdrama', but the play's initial role reversal, where Helena 'occupies the masculine position of the desiring subject' and where Bertram 'occupies the feminine space of the Other' is eventually restored.[36] 'The finale of *All's Well* could be said to dramatize the amelioration of castration anxiety', McCandless argues.[37] Julia Briggs shows how the Shakespearean bed trick, which popularized the device in early modern English drama, both contained infidelity and consummated marriage at the same time, which in turn echoed

[33] See William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Poems*, from The Folger Shakespeare, ed. by Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles. (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1994).

[34] Gerard, p. 1413

[35] Desens, p. 67.

[36] McCandless, 450.

[37] Ibid, 467.

contemporary marriage laws where 'a potentially sinful act could retrospectively be converted into a legitimate act'.[38] Jean Howard identifies in Helena a paradox, since she demonstrates one of the 'most arresting displays of female agency in all of Shakespeare', which is safely situated within 'the constraints of a particular social system, one that positions her as at once… self-actualizing and fully in thrall to patriarchal ideologies'.[39] For Howard, Helena becomes both pedagogically and biologically responsible for the next generation of oppressive patriarchs.[40] It is no wonder that *All's Well* is considered a 'problem' play.

But other scholars are willing to see Helena's agency as more subversive. For Caroline Bicks, Anne McIlhaney, and Erin Ellerbeck, the choices that Helena makes (and the freedom she has to make choices of her own) are what set her apart from other Shakespearean heroines. For Bicks, the play is 'driven by a young woman's plans to get pregnant and to make a man appear to be a father; as such, it exploits that gap and its attendant anxieties about paternity and the power of quick-witted women'.[41] Kimberly Anne Coles convincingly argues that the women of this play help to 'reconstitute blood itself' by overturning a social hierarchy based on inheritance and blood and replacing it with a system based on merit.[42] For McIlhaney, the play's problem is solved if we shift our focus from the uncomfortable coupling and marriage of Helena and Bertram, and instead focus on the solidification of a bond between Helena and the Countess, who chooses her as a daughter-in-law before Bertram accepts her as his wife.[43] Ellerbeck also champions this chosen mother and chosen daughter relationship above all others in the play, especially insofar as Helena's 'grafting' onto Bertram's family tree not only enhances her social status, but simultaneously circumvents 'the need for the male role in reproduction'.[44] Choosing Helena for her daughter(-in-law) accomplishes the same familial graft as the bed trick does, and Bertram is oblivious to both.

---

[38] Julia Briggs, 'Shakespeare's Bed-Tricks', *Essays in Criticism* 44.4 (1994), 293-314 (p. 306).

[39] Jean Howard, 'Female Agency in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 106 (2006), 43-60 (p. 44).

[40] Ibid, 47.

[41] Caroline Bicks, 'Planned Parenthood: Minding the Quick Woman in *All's Well*', *Modern Philology* 103.3 (2006), 299-331 (p. 304).

[42] Coles, 48.

[43] Anne McIlhaney, '"Those That Were Enwombed Mine": Adoptive Mothering and Genre in *All's Well that Ends Well* and Shakespeare's Romances', *Journal of the Wooden O* 21.1 (2021), 85-93 (p. 92).

[44] Erin Ellerbeck, 'Adoption and the Language of Horticulture in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *Studies in English Literature* 51.2 (2011), 305-26 (p. 315).

In spite of the attention Ellerbeck draws to grafting and horticultural metaphors in *All's Well*, women's relationship with the handful of plants mentioned in the play have yet to be significantly explored. *All's Well* in particular goes to great lengths to establish the limited knowledge that the play's men possess about plants and their uses. When the ailing King welcomes Bertram to his palace, he admits that his doctors have 'worn me out / With several applications' (1.2.73-4), which seem to be having no effect whatsoever. Parolles and Lafew are astonished at Helena's mysterious miracle cure, given that 'the artists' of medicine, including the oft-cited 'Galen and Paracelsus' along with other 'learned and authentic Fellows' have ruled the king's case an 'incurable' one (2.3.10-14). Men in this play have no more business commenting on medical matters than the clown does in trying to eulogize the supposedly deceased Helena. When he tries to compliment her for being 'the sweet-marjoram of the sallet, or, rather, the herb of grace', the clown names two herbs with pleasant-sounding names, but which actually have a bitter taste. 'They are not herbs, you knave', Lafew corrects him, 'they are nose-herbs'. The clown then admits that he has 'not much skill in grass' (4.5.17-19) – or 'grace' as the case may be.

Neither Lafew nor the clown seem aware that both sweet marjoram and herb of grace (or rue) were also used as abortifacients. Of sweet marjoram, Dioscorides notes that 'It is good for the closing up and distortions of the vulva, extracts the menstrual flow and afterbirth, is an abortifacient, and refreshes constriction of the vulva'.[45] Nicholas Culpepper's *Herbal* notes that marjoram 'provokes urine, heats the womb, provokes the menses, strengthens the memory and helps the judgment, causes an able brain';[46] herb of grace is used for, among other things, 'inflammations of the priapus and matrix' and is 'naught for pregnant women: no herb resists poison more'.[47] John Gerard omits mention of marjoram's abortifacient properties in his *Herbal*,[48] but identifies among the 'virtues' of herb of grace that it 'provoketh urine, bringeth downe the sicknes, expelleth the dead

[45] Dioscorides, p. 56.

[46] Nicholas Culpepper, *The Complete Herbal* (London, 1850), p. 281. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/49513/49513-h/49513-h.htm

[47] Ibid, p. 244.

[48] Gerard, pp. 538-544. Gerard's omission of marjoram's abortifacient properties seems like a deliberate one, especially because his entry on 'Wilde Marjoram' quotes from 'Dioscorides and Plinie', who do speak of its abortifacient faculties. Gerard writes that 'the weight of a dram taken with meade or honied water, draweth foorth by stoole blacke and filthie humours' (p. 542). Riddle notes that Gerard does not discuss abortion as immoral or suggest that menstrual stimulators are a form of abortion, but his omissions are symptomatic of the systemic erasure of knowledge about abortifacient plants from books on plants and botany that took place throughout the seventeenth century. See *Eve's Herbs*, p. 184.

childe and afterbirth, being inwardly taken, or the decoction drunke, and is good for the mother, being but onely smelled unto'.[49]

Helena and other women in the play, on the contrary, show that they are quite knowledgeable about plants and their medicinal uses. Helena informs the countess of how intimate she is with her father's teachings:

> …my father left me some prescriptions
> Of rare and prov'd effects, such as his reading
> And manifest experience had collected
> For general sovereignty. (1.1.216-19)

Of course, Helena is careful to ground her knowledge in a patriarchal legacy, especially when she offers to use her knowledge to cure the king of his ailment. Helena reminds the king that everything she knows, she learned from her father:

> On's bed of death
> Many receipts he gave me…
> …the honour
> Of my dear father's gift stands chief in power,
> I come to tender it and my appliance,
> With all bound humbleness. (2.1.103-13).

Because a number of medical books published during the period also contained detailed descriptions of plants and their medicinal purposes, it might be safe to assume that the 'receipts' Helena receives from her father on his death bed consisted of a curated Herbal or a guide to the art of surgery. Nicholas Culpeper's *The English Physician* (1652), the *Dispensatorium* (1542) of Valerius Cordus, and the Augsberger *Pharmacopoeia* (1564) are three examples of how the study of plants and the study of medicine were part of the same discourse.[50] Of course, Helena promises to heal the king with a cure that has been overlooked by ancients and contemporaries, which could also suggest that what she possesses is not just another Pharmacopoeia, but a text that endorses epistemological discovery over another translation of Galen or Dioscorides.[51] At the same time, naming

[49] Gerard, p. 1072.

[50] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs,* p. 146.

[51] Richard Stensgaard makes a case for why Helena's cure ought to be read in the context of an ongoing medical debate between Galenists (who believe herbal medicines are the best way to regulate illnesses caused by humors being out of balance in the body) and Paracelsians (who argue that disease must be driven

her esteemed late father as the source of her knowledge is an intelligent rhetorical move in a historical context where the only difference between a midwife and a witch could be a man's endorsement or censure. Midwives were especially susceptible to accusations of witchcraft given their knowledge of poisons and abortifacient plants.[52] This is a fear the play even seems to promote when Diana boasts that she would kill Parolles: 'Were I his lady / I would poison that vile rascal' (3.5.84).

Helena's caution is all the more justified given that the culture she inhabits is saturated in toxic masculinity. When Parolles is blindfolded and captured by his own men, he is quick to betray his comrades by speaking some rather uncomfortable truths to his unseen 'enemies'. Of captain Dumaine, he reports 'He will steal, sir, an egg out of a cloister; for rapes and ravishments he parallels Nessus' (4.3.241-3). When Bertram lies about how he obtained Helena's ring, the king is willing to believe he obtained it by 'rough enforcement' (5.3.107). References to rape in this play coincide with dramatic irony meant to provoke an uncomfortable laughter. But another 'problem' with *All's Well* is that Helena might not be the play's only rapist.

Despite the risks Helena runs by showing off her medical knowledge to a court of useless male surgeons, she is not the only woman in the play who betrays some knowledge of medicinal herbs. Bertram's mother the Countess also hints that she has knowledge of both poisons and abortifacient plants. When she insists that Helena call her 'mother' rather than 'mistress', the Countess uses metaphors of planting at the same time that she suggests she may have had children other than Bertram:

> I say I am your mother,
> And put you in the catalogue of those
> That were enwombed mine. 'Tis often seen
> Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds
> A native slip to us from foreign seeds.
> You ne'er oppress'd me with a mother's groan,
> Yet I express to you a mother's care. (1.3.137-43)

---

out by its opposite or by that which is most toxic to the disease, which could be distilled into a chemical compound and administered), and situates her particular medical jargon firmly on the side of the Paracelsians. See Richard K. Stensgaard, '*All's Well that Ends Well* and the Galenico-Paracelsian Controversy', *Renaissance Quarterly* 25.2 (1972), 173-88 (p. 178).

[52] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs,* p. 137.

As Ellerbeck contends, the grafting metaphor here 'asserts the ability of women to work within and outside patriarchal norms of familial formation' by allowing them to add onto the family tree 'as they see fit'.[53] But the Countess also reveals something else to Helena here. The play makes no mention of Bertram having any siblings, and yet the Countess suggests she has 'enwombed' enough children to 'catalogue'. She does not mention how many of her children *have* oppressed her with a 'mother's groan'; she does not mention how many times she has given birth, had a miscarriage, or deliberately terminated a pregnancy. She does, however, hint that she knows how prevent one. In the same speech, she asks Helena

> …does it curd thy blood
> To say I am thy mother? What's the matter,
> That this distempered messenger of wet,
> The many-colour'd Iris, rounds thine eye? (1.3.144-8)

The 'wet' in Helena's 'Iris' is formed by her tears, which she sheds at the thought of being Bertram's adopted sister rather than his wife. But Iris (*Iris germanica*) is also a plant whose function works to 'curd' a woman's blood in a different sense; Dioscorides mentions that Iris 'taken in a drink with wine' can 'bring out the menstrual flow'.[54] Probably quoting Dioscorides, Gerard echoes that Iris (or Flower de Luce) 'bringeth downe the monthly course of women', and can also 'mollifieth and openeth the matrix'.[55] Even before the Countess realizes 'you love my son' (1.3.168), she promotes 'adoption' – and her preference to choose Helena as her 'native slip', though she comes from 'foreign seeds' – in the same breath in which she puns on the name of a plant known to hasten menstruation. To the Countess, the act of preventing children is just as bloody (metaphorically, anyway) as getting rid of them after they are born. Once she learns of Bertram's intention to abandon his new wife, the Countess casts her son out in order to embrace Helena as her daughter: 'He was my son, / But I do wash his name out of my blood / And thou are all my child' (3.2.66-8). Paired with the suggestion that she has had children who have not survived, the Countess's declaration of disowning her son (washing her 'blood' of his name) sounds particularly violent. It may even help to establish her familiarity with abortions.

Abortifacient plants mentioned in *All's Well* trouble the idea that the play's coalition of women orchestrate the bed trick quietly and obediently under patriarchal law. If Helena's

[53] Ellerbeck, 320.

[54] Dioscorides, p. 1.

[55] Gerard, p. 47.

knowledge of plants helps her to cure the king, they might also prove useful to her as she tries to secure her husband's fidelity. I suggest she might accomplish this task with the help of abortifacient plants, which she could use to fake her pregnancy. Bertram still seems to doubt his paternal achievement in his final line of the play as he awaits further explanation to 'make me know this clearly' (5.3.309). His skepticism is not unfounded, especially because the only proof the play provides of Helena's pregnancy is Diana's testimony. Diana reveals Helena's resurrection in a riddle that works to confirm that Bertram's wife has met the conditions of his not-impossible challenge to 'get the ring upon my finger' and to 'show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to' (3.2.56-60). Diana insists that Bertram 'knows himself my bed he hath defil'd; / And at that time he got his wife with child' (5.3.294-5). How could Bertram have slept with Diana if he also impregnated his wife Helena at the same instant? When Diana frames her riddle in slightly different terms, she conflates one who is dead (Helena) with one who is quick with child (also Helena): 'Dead though she be she feels her young one kick. / So there's my riddle; one that's dead is quick' (5.3.296-7). Diana's syntax, of course, ends up conflating the dead mother with the quick kicking fetus, and possibly contains another riddle that goes unsolved by the play's 'problematic' and comedic ending: How do we know that Helena is really pregnant? How much time has passed between the bed trick and Helena's supposedly pregnant resurrection? Enough time for a fetus to 'quicken'? Caroline Bicks suggests that Helena's fetal 'quickening' is tied to her feminine 'quick' wit or imagination, which consistently undermines early modern paternity by threatening to influence the shape and appearance of the fetus. This threat is reinforced if Helena's pregnancy remains unmarked on stage, which is within reason; a 'quick' fetus need not imply a visible baby bump.[56] Though I agree with Bicks that Helena 'clearly knows how to use her wits to get pregnant in one shot and may know how to feign pregnancy', I suggest that Helena exploits her knowledge of plants to achieve this deception, rather than conceiving of a *'Mola*' through her own imaginative volition.[57] Given her knowledge of plants, I think that Helena is capable of convincing her audience of patriarchs that she is 'quick' with child using some plant-based means of halting her menstruation cycle.

Helena has a number of legal and medical incentives for wanting to put off pregnancy for as long as possible. The production of a male heir would mean the loss of control over her new fortune and inheritance in the event that her war-hungry husband should die, for example. 'I am a simple maid', she tells the bachelors who are ready to marry her, 'and

[56] Bicks, 326-7. As Bicks argues, 'The only evidence we have of Helena's pregnancy lies in Diana's comment that she is 'quick', and 'feels her young one kick'… The kicking that indicated quickening did not necessarily indicate a visibly advanced stage of pregnancy'.

[57] Ibid, 324.

therein wealthiest / That I protest I simply am a maid' (2.3.66-7). Instead of reading Helena as a woman who appeases the patriarchal status quo with her bed trick, I prefer to read her as a woman who is able to have her cake and eat it too, who can appease men who surround her without giving into them entirely. Jean Howard suggests the play's problematic ending is resolved so long as we don't see it as a problem: 'Shakespeare does everything he can… to underscore how little the social function of marriage can be reduced to a question of the personal happiness of those who undertake it, especially in noble families'.[58] Anne Mcllhaney similarly reframes the play's problematic ending in order to read it as comedic. McIlhaney argues that what distinguishes *All's Well* from Shakespeare's other 'problem plays' is that it 'emphasizes the issue of choice in parenting in a way that none of the later romances and tragicomedies do'.[59] For Mcllhaney, the play's chief problem is solved when Helena chooses not Bertram to be her husband but the Countess to be her mother-in-law. I suggest that Helena makes a different choice in the play's final moments – to fake her pregnancy. Is it so difficult to imagine a woman in early modern England wanting to marry a man not so she can have his children, but so that she can enjoy her new social station and the pleasures of a socially-sanctioned sexual relationship? Before his shotgun wedding and before he acquired his coat of arms, Shakespeare himself may have desired nothing less.[60]

Helena's critics have failed to notice just how much power she assumes by receiving permission to cure a royal fistula. While the play is mostly silent about the specific remedy Helena employs on the king's fistula, there is a strong possibility that the remedy would have involved either medicinal plants or surgery – or both. The play's source, William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1575), which is really an English translation of the ninth story from the third day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, is slightly more specific about the kind of remedy used; to cure the King's 'Fistula', Giletta makes 'a pouder of certaine herbes, which she thought meete for that disease'.[61] While fistulas were a

[58] Howard, 57.

[59] McIlhaney, 92. In a play where choice seems to characterize its genre, Shakespeare departs from his source text by introducing another ambiguous problem where Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* provides resolutions. In Painter's story, Giletta is not reunited with her husband until her sons – both of them, twins, 'which were very like unto their father' (Painter, p. 151) – are born. The subject of twins may have been painful for Shakespeare following the death of his son, Hamnet. But the choice to leave the child in utero gives Helena a number of options to consider at the end.

[60] As Coles argues, 'Shakespeare clearly wants to transfer virtue from inheritance to merit (from Bertram to Helen)… the racial logic that he is most committed to dismantling is the one in which he is most directly implicated' (48-9).

[61] William Painter, *The Palace of Pleasure beautified, adorned and well furnished, with pleasaunt histories and excellent nouelles, selected out of diuers good and commendable authors,* (London, 1566), p. 146.

relatively common ailment in the early modern period, Shakespeare's representation of the affliction may be intended as a source of humiliation for the French monarch – and as a source of comedy for the play's English audience. A king with a fistula could be interpreted as either effeminate (for having more holes in his body than a man ought to), or as the victim of a venereal disease. The term 'fistula' is still used in modern medicine, and it defines an opening between two organs, or an opening between an organ and the skin. In urology, this can refer to a second urethra, which sometimes develop in boys and young men and requires surgery.[62]

In the early modern period, a fistula could refer to any number of exterior wounds or ulcers. Thomas Johnson's translation of the sixteenth-century French surgeon Ambroise Paré describes the fistula as a kind of vagina, leading to the 'belly' or 'womb': 'some run straight in, others and that the greater part, have turnings and windings; some have one, others have more orifices and windings; some are at the Joynts, others penetrate into some capaoity [sic] of the body, as into the chest, belly, guts, womb[,] bladder; some are easily, others difficulty cured, and some wholly uncurable'.[63] Shakespeare keeps his audience in the dark about where precisely the king's fistula is located on his body, but the secrecy surrounding Helena's cure implies it is in a sensitive area. (In Shakespeare's source, the Fistula is fixed firmly 'upon his breast'.)[64]

The cause of the ailment also invites speculation. Another early modern source on the 'causes of the Fistula' identifies some of the more common (and more infrequently reported) origins: suppurated hemorrhoids and gonorrhea, or 'an ill cur'd Clap, which is more frequently the cause of Fistulas than any other, I having observ'd that where one Fistula is occasion'd by any other means, ten proceeds from that'.[65] Richard Stensgaard

---

[62] Joseph R. Wagner, et al. 'Congenital Posterior Urethral Perineal Fistulae: A Unique Form of Urethral Duplication', *Urology* 48.2 (1996), 277-80.

[63] Ambroise Paré, *The workes of that famous chirurgion Ambrose Parey translated out of Latine and compared with the French. by Th: Johnson*, (London, 1665), p. 485.

[64] Painter, *The Palace of Pleasure*, p. 146.

[65] See *An Account of the causes of some particular rebellious distempers,* (London, 1670), p. 55; *Aristoteles Masterpiece, or The Secrets of Generation displayed in all the parts thereof,* (London, 1684). If the source of the king's fistula is in fact 'the clap', we have another reason to suspect that Iris would be Helena's preferred treatment. Gerard's *Herbal* also mentions that the Flower de-Luce of Florence 'profiteth also much those that haue the Gonorrhey or running of the raines, being drunke with vineger as *Dioscorides* saith' (p. 50).

makes a convincing case that the fistula is meant to summon symptoms of plague for its reputation as an ailment that is 'not notorious' (1.1.33).[66]

Helena's treatment method may be innovative, but it is worth noting that the popular methods for treating a fistula were also potentially dangerous and humiliating for the patient. Perhaps the king's reluctance to let Helena treat him makes sense once we understand the early modern remedy options. Paré suggests that a fistula that has penetrated to one's bowels is not to be suffered lightly by 'effeminate and tender persons, who had rather dye by much, than to suffer the paine and torment of the operation…'[67] The surgery could be invasive, especially if the fistula was near the sphincter, as Paré details:

> If the Fustula [sic] must be cured by manuall operation, let the patient lye so upon his backe, that lifting up his legges, his thighs may presse his belly, then let the Chirurgion, having his nailes pared, put his finger besmeared with some ointment into the patients Fundament; then let him thrust in at the orifice of the Fistula a thick Leaden needle drawing after it a thread consisting of threat and horse haires woven together, and then with his finger taking hold thereof and somewhat crooking it, draw it forth at the Fundament, together with the end of the thread. Then let him knit the two ends of the thread with a draw or loose knot, so that he may straiten them at his pleasure…'.[68]

Whether Helena must clip her nails to cure the king or not is a detail that remains confidential between the surgeon and her patient. But Helena's knowledge of plant medicines might make 'some ointment' for such a procedure easy to procure. Culpepper's *Herball* lists a number of plants that might serve in the treatment of fistulae, including cow parsnips and savine, which Dioscorides notes also had abortifacient properties.[69]

---

[66] Stensgaard, 175. The story of Giletta and Beltramo from William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* is an English version of the story of Juliet and Bertrand, the ninth story of the third day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Given that Boccaccio's narrators are telling stories to pass the time in quarantine while they wait out the plague ravaging Florence, bubonic plague seems like a strong candidate for the cause of the fistula in Shakespeare's source texts.

[67] Paré, p. 485.

[68] Ibid, pp. 485-6.

[69] Dioscorides, pp. 431, 102. Culpepper's fistula cures also include: Alehoof/ Ground-Ivy (6), Asarabacca (13), Bugle (34), Wild Campion (41), Cinquefoil (49), Dove's Foot/ Crane's Bill (66), Flower-de-Luce (79), Winter-green (87), oats (help with 'fistulas of the fundament') (129), cow parsnips (133), pellitory of the wall (136), ragwort (which prevents fistulas from 'spread[ing] farther') (150), rattle grass (150), savine

Dioscorides also names a number of plants used in the cure of 'fistulas' or ulcers, including Iris, dragonwort, friar's cowl, and Black Hellebore, all of which also served as abortifacients in the ancient world.[70] Dragonwort (*Arum dracunculus*), Dioscorides notes, could be mixed with honey as a suppository, and has 'use as an abortifacient' as well.[71] A salve made of friar's cowl was deemed 'effective for fistulas', but he also warns that when it is 'put in or applied[,] it destroys the genitals of any living creature'.[72] Black Hellebore could '[expel] the menstrual flow, is an abortifacient, and cleans fistulas (put into them and taken away after the third day)'.[73]

Helena might hint at her father's secret cure for a fistula in the way she describes it. Of all the 'receipts' her father bestowed on her, there was

> Chiefly one,
> Which, as the dearest issue of his practice,
> And of his old experience th' only darling,
> He bade me store up as a triple eye,
> Safer than mine own two… (2.1.104-8)

Caroline Bicks suggests that Helena's 'triple eye' refers to Helena's imagination, which possessed the power to cure the king, but also the power to impress upon her offspring the likeness of her father, her husband, or any man she is willing to concentrate on or to think of.[74] At the same time, Helena's third 'eye' could very well be another reference to Iris, which may prove a dear 'issue' to Helena as well if it is able to win her both the king's favor and the husband of her choice.

Herb of Grace might be another candidate for a plant that will prove a darling to her. When the king asks her how much time she thinks it will take to cure him, Helena suggests it will take no longer than a day, saying: 'The greatest Grace lending grace… what is

(166), star thistle (175), Fuller's Thistle/Teasle (181), vervain (188), yarrow (199), Bugle (233), and Tree and Ground-Ivy (238).

[70] Dioscorides's fistula cures include: Iris (1), Mayweed (71), oil of cinnamon (76), papyrus (which can help to 'open the mouth of fistulas') (114), pig fat (219), greater plantain (279), water arum ('salves are made from it for fistulas, and for bringing out the embryo') (331), Fuller's Teazle (379), Cow Parsnip (468), Green Winged Orchid (521), Cinquefoil (584), Yarrow (652), *Euphorbia characias* (721), Shield Fern (735), grape vine (746), rust (789), calcium carbonate (as a suppository) (802).

[71] Dioscorides, p. 328.

[72] Ibid, p. 332.

[73] Ibid, p. 700.

[74] Bicks, 309.

infirm from your sound parts shall fly' (2.1.159-66). The double mention of 'Grace' here summons not only the specter of God and of good luck, but also of a medicinal herb named later in the play: herb of Grace, or rue (*Ruta graveolens*). Helena is confident enough in her 'cure' that she is willing to risk more than her life to save the king and achieve some sort of social mobility. When the king asks what she is willing to venture, she answers:

> Tax of impudence,
> A strumpet's boldness, a divulged shame,
> Traduc'd by odious ballads; my maiden's name
> Sear'd otherwise; ne worse of worst, extended
> With vildest torture, let my life be ended. (2.1.169-173)

Both her 'life' and her 'maiden's name' seem to be at stake. In Helena's mind, probing the king's fistula is her only hope of achieving a socially-sanctioned sexual congress with Bertram and the social mobility it promises.

It becomes clear by the end of *All's Well* that Helena is not only clever enough to fake her own death and to trick her husband into putting his foot in his mouth; she is also more than capable of faking conception. The only evidence the play offers of Helena's pregnancy is Diana's announcement that it is so. Contemporary gynecological manuals such as the English translation of Eucharius Rosslin's *The birth of mankynde, otherwise named the womans booke* (1565) include entire chapters dedicated to the art of identifying whether a woman has conceived following copulation. 'First the flowers issue not in so great quantitie as they are wont, but waxe lesse and lesse', Rosslin writes.[75] Helena clearly has access to books that can provide instruction on how to make her menstrual cycle more infrequent, if she should need to consult a manual at all. Another test from *Aristotle's Masterpiece* (1684) notes that 'Virtigo and dimness of the Eyes' are tell-tale symptoms of a woman who has conceived.[76] If Helena can fake her own death, she can certainly pretend to have poor eyesight or pretend to desire a husband who has so little to offer. Her *blind* attraction to Bertram might be part of an elaborate act that she is in fact quick with child. And although some span of time passes between the performance of the bed trick and Helena's resurrection, it seems to be only a few days. (Women do not typically feel the 'quickness' of a child until 16-25 weeks of pregnancy).[77] Yet another test involves

[75] Eucharius Rosslin, *The birth of mankynde, otherwise named the womans booke,* (London, 1565), p. 290.

[76] *Aristotle's Masterpiece,* p. 119.

[77] Stephanie Watson, 'Feeling Your Baby Kick', *WebMD*, 2021. Accessed 10 Oct 2022.

giving the woman a concoction of wine, water, and honey before bed: 'yf after that drynke she feele great payne, gnawing, and gymblyng in her bellye, then be ye sure that she is conceaved'.[78] Again, we would do well not to underestimate Helena's ability to dissemble.

'This deed… makes me unpregnant': Abortifacients Solutions in Problem Plays

The mobilization of abortifacient plants on the early modern English stage is not unique to Shakespeare, though their function in the bed trick plays catalogued by Desens may be worth further study. Even in *Measure for Measure*, abortion is not so subtle. If we consider the Duke's motivations for temporarily relinquishing power in Vienna to Angelo, one can even see how abortion – or the promotion of private, household remedies to the crisis of proliferating bastards – becomes a potential solution to Vienna's bastard boom. The Duke imagines his city as a neglected and unkept garden. As he explains to Friar Thomas, the laws of Vienna have been poorly enforced 'this fourteen years'; the 'strict statutes and most biting laws' have bent too long to 'headstrong weeds' until 'the rod / Becomes more mocked than feared' (1.3.19-27). Angelo thinks of his new post as a kind of gardener insofar as he vows not to 'make a scarecrow of the law'; Vienna has become a place where 'custom' transforms a 'terror' into a mere 'perch' for birds that hope to prey on one's crops (2.1.1-4). The play's problems begin in the garden, but they are solved in the garden house, the site of Mariana's bed trick. The Duke and Isabella find Mariana at a 'moated grange' (3.1.270). In case the location is not fertile enough for a bed trick, Isabella makes it clear that Mariana's tryst with Angelo will take place in a womb-like space at the end of a vaginal passageway:

> He hath a garden circummured with brick,
> Whose western side is with a vineyard backed;
> And to that vineyard is a planched gate,
> That makes his opening with this bigger key.
> This other doth command a little door
> Which from the vineyard to the garden leads (4.1.28-33).

Full of walls, openings, gates, and little doors requiring bigger keys, Angelo's garden house is a maze of innuendo and fertility, which all but guarantees that sex will result in

https://www.webmd.com/baby/fetal-movement-feeling-baby-kick

[78] Rosslin, p. 290.

conception.[79] However, once Angelo learns of Claudio's beheading, he imagines his shame in terms of botched conception and abortion: 'This deed unshapes me quite, makes me unpregnant, / And dull to all proceedings' (4.4.22-23). His phrasing begs the question: what kinds of plants are being grown in his garden house? Are they plants that will sustain the body politic by bringing order to a garden overgrown by weeds and crows? Or are they plants that can provide new solutions to the problem of unwanted pregnancies?

Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (1615) is another bed trick comedy whose sexual antics generate reproductive mishaps with herbal solutions. The play features two different bed tricks, neither one of which results in a pregnancy. But the eponymous witch has a bustling trade in both dead children and abortifacient plants. One of the witches, Stadlin, walks onstage with '*the dead body of a baby*' (SD. 1.2.19), and Hecate orders him to 'boil it well; preserve the fat' (1.2.19).[80] The witches operate a kind of magical apothecary shop, where Sebastian and Almachildes can procure the means of obstructing the consummation of a marriage and of securing Amoretta's fancy. But the witches are also outfitted with all manner of abortifacient ingredients – or 'magical herbs' (1.2.38) – which Hecate tosses into her boiling cauldron:

> I thrust in *eleoselinum* lately,
> *Aconitum, frondes populeus,* and soot –
> You may see that, he looks so black i'th'mouth –
> Then *sium, acarum vulgaro* too,
> *Pentaphyllon,* the blood of a flitter-mouse,
> *Solanum somnificum et loeum*. (1.2.38-45)

Her bubbling broth is a threat to procreation in the play, especially because several of these 'magical' ingredients have proven uses for women's reproductive health.

---

[79] One reason it might be appropriate to read the bed trick in *Measure for Measure* as rape is that metaphors of doors, locks, and keys were frequently used in early modern depositions of rape and sexual violence. While such metaphors were used by women to describe rape in a public deposition, these metaphors were also appropriated by men as a way of denying rape allegations. As Garthine Walker summarizes this rhetorical approach, 'women enticingly leave open doors to chambers within which they sit or lie upon beds, waiting for their unsuspecting male victim. Once inside, it is the female predator—the early modern *femme fatale*—who locks the door' (15). Paired with the suggestion that the early modern rhetoric for discussing rape borrows heavily from 'plots of Jacobean drama or medieval romance', Isabella's description of the passage ways of the garden house anticipates the absence of consent at the same time that it promotes the space as a fertile one.

[80] Thomas Middleton, *The Witch*, in *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays,* ed. by Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 85-142.

Eleoselinum (mountain parsley) is a 'diuretic and expels the menstrual flow'.[81] *Frondes populeus* (poplar leaves) are 'good in decoctions made for all those disorders requiring bathing around the vulva'.[82] *Acarum vulgaro* (common myrtle) 'draws out the menstrual flow taken as a drink and applied'.[83] *Pentaphyllon* is cinquefoil, which can 'help' with 'drawing down the afterbirth'.[84] The play also does not shy away from references to miscarriage and abortion. When the secretly pregnant Francisca witnesses the sadistic Duke drink from the skull of his lately-conquered father-in-law, she believes the spectacle will be enough 'to bring it out' prematurely (1.1.134-5). When she finally does have the baby, she enlists the help of Aberzanes to surrender the infant to a foundling house (2.3). As I have suggested elsewhere, Middleton's play seems uniquely equipped to teach a potentially illiterate audience of women about some of the natural remedies to the problem of an unwanted pregnancy.[85]

Other bed trick plays feature characters who have access to herbal medicines and poisons, which suggest they might know how to administer herbal abortions – especially for unwanted pregnancies resulting from deceit in the bedroom. Samuel Harding's *Sicily and Naples, or The Fatal Union* (1640) features Ursini sleeping with (and impregnating) Felicia while he is dressed as Ferrando, the Prince of Naples. Frederico, disguised as the Moor Zisco, rapes and then kills his own sister Felicia before she can have the baby, but only because he thinks he is raping Calantha, whose husband Ferrando killed his father. Felicia spends half the play dressed as Calantha's servant Sylvio. Once Calantha realizes that Sylvio is in fact a pregnant woman (but before she takes pity on her and realizes that the same man, Ferrando, her husband, killed both of their fathers), Calantha threatens Felicia's pregnant body and then kicks her on stage:

> **Calantha:** …Be sudden, or I swear by my just anger,
> I'll straight rip up the cradle of thy lust,
> The den where all thy loose adulteries
> Were acted, search each corner of thy womb,
> That keeps a record of thy villainies.
> **Sylvio:** Ferrando was the author of my fall.

[81] Dioscorides, p. 452.

[82] Ibid, p. 27.

[83] Ibid, p. 22.

[84] Ibid, p. 584; Corbin and Sedge, pp. 222-3.

[85] William Steffen, '"I'm with child and this will bring it out": A Legal and Ecological Framework for Teaching Middleton's *The Witch*', in *Reproductive Justice in the Premodern Classroom: Post*-Roe *Pedagogies,* ed. by Maeve Callan, Emma Maggie Solberg, and Valerie Traub. Medieval Institute Publications. Forthcoming 2026.

Calantha: More lying than that evil genius
That wrought the first man's fall. *(Kicks her and exits)*.[86]

Calantha's kick has the potential to stage an attempted abortion, depending on where Calantha aims her foot. But the play also features the physician Bentivogli, who has access to drugs which he utilizes in sedating Calantha and in 'cool[ing]' Alphonso (108).

Philip Massinger's *The Parliament of Love* (1624) features a bed trick much like Helena's in *All's Well,* where Beaupre arranges to sleep with her own philandering husband, Clarindore. After he thinks he has slept with Bellisant, Clarindore discovers that he has actually slept with Bellisant's Moor slave, Calista. Calista turns out to be Beaupre in a racial disguise, which seems aimed at humiliating Clarindore further. Meanwhile, Dinant, the court physician, tortures Novall with a 'cooler' (291) – a cordial that makes him ill – for attempting to sleep with Dinant's wife.[87] Dinant shames Novall 'and the profession of your rutting gallants/ That hold their doctor's wives as free for them, / As some of us do our apothecaries!' (299). John Marston's *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606) also features drugs in close proximity to a bed trick. Sophonisba drugs her Ethiopian eunuch slave Vangue with a 'sleepy opium' (3.1.162) and then leaves him in Syphax's bed, hoping that Syphax will rape Vangue instead of her.[88] When he discovers the switcheroo, Syphax kills Vangue. Sophonisba remains a virgin until her death at the end of the play, when her husband Massinissa kills her with poison.

Herbs, potions, and poisons function differently in comedies than they do in tragedies, and so do bed tricks. Shakespeare's problem comedies are important for the way they popularized the bed trick on the early modern English stage. But they are also important for the way they propose abortifacient plants as alternative solutions to the problems that the bed tricks are meant to solve. Increasing our attention on the plants mentioned in these plays allows us to see the play's heroines as more than just women who temper the boundaries of the patriarchal status quo so that they can fit safely and comfortably within them in time for the curtain call. In *Measure for Measure* especially, the law that seeks to rob Claudio of his life, Juliet of her child's father, and Isabella of her chastity is merely a red herring for a male-dominated system that seeks to gain access and control over women's decisions and bodies. As such, the play is especially relevant to a context where

---

[86] Samuel Harding, *Sicily and Naples, or The Fatall Union* (London, 1640), 97.

[87] Philip Massinger, *The Parliament of Love* (London, 1624).

[88] John Marston, *The Wonder of Women or The Tragedy of Sophonisba,* in *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays,* edited by Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 33-84.

the US Supreme Court has overturned *Roe v. Wade* in a 6-3 decision, where five of the six justices who voted to overturn *Roe* were men.

Attending to the history of abortifacient plants is especially important in a post-*Roe* context because it places the historical impact of the *Dobbs* decision in a much wider context. On the one hand, it emphasizes how patriarchal laws and the modernization of medicine (along with the rise of Big Pharma) have historically aimed to prevent women from walking outside and procuring an abortion from a common weed or a carefully-curated garden. Rachel O'Donnell's study of Guinea Hen Weed (or *Petiveria alliacea*), for example, a well-known abortifacient to indigenous and African slave populations of the Caribbean, demonstrates how the emergence of botany as a discursive discipline of the European Enlightenment was at once a colonial undertaking that sought to systematically erase indigenous knowledge about plants and a patriarchal one, which sought to place control over women's bodies and knowledge about reproductive health into the hands of male physicians.[89] John Riddle similarly concludes from a survey of several sixteenth- and seventeenth-century medical and botanical books that there was a marked 'restraint in divulging birth control information' as time progressed, or that it was removed completely, 'even when some of the information they used was from classical sources'.[90] But on the other hand, attending to abortifacient plants in Shakespearean comedy simultaneously undermines that history of modernity by restoring part of an ecological consciousness that was annihilated by its establishment. I should clarify that my purpose in exploring this topic has not been to promote the use of the antifertility recipes cited here; I echo John Riddle's cautionary note that 'The possibility for error is too great and the risk might be considerable'.[91] But the subversive potential abortifacient plants in the patriarchal-legal frameworks of Shakespeare's problem plays seem particularly salutary. In the wake of the *Dobbs* decision, subversive methods of providing abortion access have emerged to circumvent oppressive state laws, which include obtaining abortion pills containing FDA-approved mifepristone (a progesterone blocker)

[89] Rachel O'Donnell, 'The Politics of Natural Knowing: Contraceptive Plant Properties in the Caribbean', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17.3 (2016), 59-79 (pp. 62-4). O'Donnell writes, 'Though its name appears to have transferred to European botanical knowledge bases, many of its properties initially did not, demonstrating an effort among explorer-botanists to remove plants with known fertility properties from publications of "New World" botany, include abortifacient plants in lists of plants of the Americas without writing of these medicinal properties, include some medicinal uses of plants but not others, or including warnings against using particular plants by pregnant women, or listing them as "poisonous"' (p. 62).

[90] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs,* p. 196.

[91] Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion,* p. ix.

and misoprostol (a labor-inducer) through the mail.[92] I suggest that we should increase our attention to abortifacient plants in literature not to circumvent established and regulated abortion methods offered by modern medicine, but rather to shed light on what is at stake when a woman's autonomy over her body becomes relinquished to patriarchal institutions of marriage, law, and medicine.

[92] National Women's Health Network, 'Safe, Online, Delivered: How to get the Abortion Pill by Mail'. 6 Oct. 2022. https://nwhn.org/safe-online-delivered-how-to-get-the-abortion-pill-by-mail/#faqs