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# And They Lived Happily Ever After. Or Did They?

An exploration of some of Shakespeare`s  
endings and why they are not happy

Bachelor's thesis in English

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Faculty of Humanities  
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## Abstract

This project seeks to delve into some of Shakespeare's plays and examine their "happy endings". Namely, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Troilus and Cressida*. By using scholars such as Ridsen and Margolis, this thesis tries to figure out what exactly it is that keeps their endings from being happy. Its focus lies in how dark humour and other dark themes together with a consideration of what would happen after the plays affect the overall endings and if it keeps the plays from achieving a happy resolution.

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## And They Lived Happily Ever After. Or Did They?

William Shakespeare has written a vast number of plays, where some of them do not fit as easily as others in certain genres. Some of these plays have been categorized as Shakespeare's problem plays or dark comedies, as they can drastically shift in tone and feature elements of both tragedy and comedy. Are the endings of the plays *The Merchant of Venice (MV)*, *Troilus and Cressida (Tro)* and *All's Well That Ends Well (AWW)* really happy endings, and if not, what is it that makes them not? The feature of dark comedy can be seen through all these plays, and all of them have what can be seen as a relatively happy ending. However, the inclusion of dark humour together with the other dark tones of the plays dampen the otherwise happy endings by not allowing the endings to let go of some of the darker tones of the plays. Even when the plays try to not use dark humour or focus on darker themes in the endings, the inclusion of it earlier in the plays can still scar and dampen the otherwise happy endings, if not completely overshadow them. All of the three plays are very different both in style and content, but all of them struggle in keeping the ending purely happy, or even happy at all. The overall negativity, lacklustre romances and the setup of characters (both antagonists and protagonists) make sure the endings are dissatisfying and not happy.

Shakespeare is a figure I have heard of and been vaguely familiar with through my entire life. Be it from school or from video games and movies that make clear references to him and his plays. It is not until recently that I have become interested in his plays, where I took particular notice to his tragedies after studying Shakespeare and *Othello* as part of this course. Everywhere you go there are references and inspiration taken from Shakespeare, and I want to become more familiar and expand on my newly born interest with his plays. When I first heard of the so called problem plays, I was instantly intrigued and wanted to explore the endings of some of these plays, since that is such an important characteristic of genre when it comes to Shakespeare.

For me to answer my research question, I carried out a literature review where I explored multiple books and articles that write about the different plays and their endings. The literature review gave me a great overlook and presented multiple different reasons as to why these plays do not end in such a way that they are sufficiently happy. Both books as well as the articles are written by English professors.

In order to find the material that I ended up using and to get the results that I got, I used a variety of search engines ranging from Google Scholar, Jstor and MLA International Bibliography. I searched with the terms “Shakespeare’s problem plays”, “problem plays and happy endings”, “problem plays endings”, as well as I searched with these terms with the different plays’ titles. Other search words were “Happy endings and Shakespeare”, “Dark comedy and happy endings”, “Shakespeare dark comedy”, “Shakespeare and black humour” and maybe a few others that I have lost track of.

Kastan, in his article, first focuses on what it is that makes a comedy a comedy and says that a comedy’s most characteristic trait is its happy ending. Comedy, he says, is not a representation of life, but rather it is free to shape its story to comforting patterns that wants to fulfil human wishes. Shakespeare, as he points out also does this in an ostentatious way in many of his comedies. However improbable, the laws of comic form win over hostile laws of reality (Kastan 576 – 577). However, in Shakespeare’s problem plays, the comic resolution does not release comic celebration (Kastan 578)

The play *All’s Well That Ends Well* ends with the king saying, “if this suit be won, / That you express content” (*AWW*. Epilogue 3076 – 3077), but “content” is not the feeling one is left with after the play (Kastan 578).

“The problem of the problem comedies is that although fictive aspirations have been gratified (thus the plays are not tragedies), we have not been led to endorse these aspirations; indeed we have been made suspicious of them (thus the plays are not precisely comedies) (Kastan 578 – 579).

Kastan points to some things that makes a play a problem play, and why it does not fit in a simple genre. He calls them generic mixtures and generic mutations, where comedies usually please what tragedies frustrates, which is the fictive aspiration (Kastan 578).

Romantic comedies are established play worlds that are unfolding to Shakespeare’s manipulation and command and is freeing to delight in. In the Problem plays, the contrivance is the characters’ own and is “throughout too self-regarding, too unresponsive to the needs and desires of others, to permit our delight” (Kastan 579). We find in these plays that comic triumph is not innocent, and not everything will yield to desire without



some other desire having to yield, which contests the claim that “all’s well ends well” (Kastan 579).

As for the ending in *All’s Well That Ends Well* one does not get to the ending without going through some darker jokes and events, like the infamous bed trick that raises some serious moral issues (Kastan 583). Yes, the play ends with the joining of Bertram and Helena, but that all has ended happily is not necessarily true. The way Helena finally earns Bertram’s love has been through a rather cruel and almost predatory way, and it takes away from the ending serving as a satisfying or attractive one. If they are to stand together after the play’s end, they do so while knowing that the process that led them together has humiliated each of them (Kastan 580).

Gross, in his article, also focuses on the play *All’s Well That Ends Well*. This article has a narrower focus on how the play ends and what factors in the play and its ending make for our response to the ending (Gross 257). Much like Kastan, Gross also discusses if the ending has truly ended well by debating what would realistically happen after the story’s conclusion, while underlining that one should not confuse drama and real life (Gross 259). The other main concern of the article is if Bertram’s and Helena’s love for each other really is genuine and true. He points out that even if the narrator says that they got happily married, the characters with their behaviour and their dialogue makes it so we can question this (Gross 260).

Gross compares the play with its source story by Boccaccio, where he shows the difference in how Beltramo’s and Bertram’s stature is diminished or raised by their reactions and events in the play. Compared to Beltramo, Bertram goes through events that lower his stature where he also reacts in clumsily and petty ways which also help diminish Bertram’s stature as a romantic hero. His degradation is portrayed as comical, but if the comic aspect is carried out to far and we end up laughing to much at Bertram it is less believable that he could be Helena’s beloved, making the ending seem less genuinely happy (Gross 263). Gross, along with Kastan, gives a lot of focus on the bed trick and its reveal in the final scene of the play. There is a consensus that this morally questionable and scheming trick dampens the ending. It makes the “happy ending” not as satisfying and believable as it could have been if Bertram’s love did not stem from a cunning and deceitful trick, which gave him little choice but to finally accept Helena as wife in the end (Gross 266 – 267).

Babula argues that Bertram is the key figure to analyse in order to get an understanding of the ending. He points to the immature adolescent that is Bertram at the beginning of the play, and how he develops and matures through the story all the way to the end. In the beginning of the play, he argues that Bertram is a child both in mind and body and he is also treated as one when in court. Here he complains that he is not allowed to go to war where he is called too young and told that it is too early for him, which underlines that others also view him as an adolescent. Then he is suddenly married to Helena, when Bertram is still sexually inexperienced. It is even suggested that he could very well be a eunuch since he would actually reject the beautiful Helena. Bertram is simply not yet ready to go into the role of husband, which is why he eagerly leaves his wife, and he is called a rash and unbridled boy by his mother (Babula 94 – 95).

Helena, compared to Bertram, is a more mature character that has obtained her goal, which was to marry Lord Bertram. She is also in the first scene joking with Parroles about losing her virginity, showing a confidence that Bertram most certainly lacks. She is the one who has the classic masculine role, where she is the one risking her life in order for her to win her prize, Bertram (Babula 95). Bertram on the other hand has achieved nothing, and only has potential to do so, showing that the marrying of Bertram and Helena is the matching of a boy and a woman. “Nor would I have him till I do deserve him” (*AWW*. 1. 3. 209) is said by Helena, but it could also unconsciously be the feelings of Bertram as well. Bertram might feel ill at place and that he is not yet deserving of a wife such as Helena, and that he first must prove his potential true and be the wooer and the one to engage in their relationship (Babula 96.)

Babula points to his maturing happening in the war where Bertram faces possible death and slays the greatest commander of the enemy. He also proves himself more of a man when he tried to seduce Diana, showing a grown confidence and a new sexual energy. However, Bertram has grown too confident that in order for him to reach maturity he needs to be put in his place and be humiliated, which he is in the final scene. Here he again acts childish trying lie after lie to keep the king’s favour as he slanders Diana. Still, in his final sentence before Helena enters the stage, he finally admits that the ring was Diana’s. When Helena enters, Bertram immediately accepts her as wife showing that he has grown enough to see the value of his wife (Babula 97 – 98).

Babula essentially explains how and why the ending in *All's Well That Ends Well* can be a happy ending. Ridsen on the other hand questions the believability in the happy ending of *All's Well*. He does not believe that Bertram has been able to change his feelings towards Helena and that it is not necessarily true that he has changed, even if Bertram himself thinks that he has. In fact, compared to Babula, who has a positive look on the ending, Ridsen says "The ending leaves both the audience and the world of the play full of uncertainty, I would say even with a fair degree of sadness..." (Ridsen 69). Ridsen argues that the title itself is a cliché and is not true. "We can too easily take the title as an assertion about the meaning of the play without considering its ironic implications both in the play and in actual experience" (Ridsen 69). Meaning that we might not believe that if we get the wished result, every mean taken both good and bad on the way to our goal is forgiven and that they do not matter. The ends do not always justify the means. It is easier to forgive ourselves for doing something bad in order for us to get what we want, compared to forgiving someone else for stepping on you in order for them to get what they want (Ridsen 70). This issue is highly relevant in *All's Well* as it can be hard to expect and to believe that Bertram has forgiven Helena for forcing and tricking him into marriage.

Right from the start, Bertram makes it clear that he wants to leave his home and seek adventure. He shows little care and patience for his mother, and he sneaks away from the king when he flees to Florence after he was forced to marry. He is not an emotional or compassionate person, but he seeks glory and wants to prove himself as courageous. Bertram was willing to fight for his freedom to choose his own adventure, but with the bed trick and the marriage to Helena he lost this freedom he had just won (Ridsen 71). It is hard to believe that Bertram could be content with the resolution seeing how he ended up with Helena as a wife and essentially the loss of his freedom.

Together with Gross and Kastan, Ridsen believes that Shakespeare wants the audience to wonder what would happen after the ending of the play. In *Henry V*, it is made clear what happens after the play, which helps us examine the play's action and ending. In plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, it is essential to consider what could happen after the ending to gain a better understanding of the play and its conclusion. This is also the case for *The Merchant of Venice* and *Troilus and Cressida*. (Ridsen 72). Doing this for *All's Well That Ends Well*, it is challenging to see that Bertram could be satisfied with the brief war experience that he got and so desperately

wanted, and that his aspiration for honour and glory has been quenched. He could very well end up leaving Helena and continue his pursuit for what in his eyes would lead to honour, rather than staying put with his new and obsessive wife.

In order for Bertram and Helena to actually obtain a happy marriage, Ridsen argues that both Bertram and Helena have to change drastically. Helena has to become less fanatical and obsessive about Bertram, while Bertram must learn to be less selfish and egotistical, and also figure out how to love a woman he has hated with a passion. As Bertram has quite the ego, he might be charmed by Helena's fixation and obsession of him where she would do anything to be with him, but the reasons he had for rejecting her in the first place still remains after their joining in the end (Ridsen 73). Bertram says in act 2, "A poor physician's daughter my wife? Disdain / Rather corrupt me ever!" (AWW. 2. 3. 126 – 127). Bertram's worry for her lower class as she is a physician's daughter is made explicit, and her social class has not changed when he declares that he will love her in act 5. This makes the ending seem rushed and ingenuine, it is also keeping it from being a classic happy ending one would expect from a comedy.

Most scholars define *The Merchant of Venice* as a comedy, as it features many comedic elements such as the marrying of Bassanio and Portia, the whimsical climax in fairytalelike Belmont and the use of disguise by Portia and Nerissa. However, not every scholar is as quick to define the play as a comedy, due to its tonal dissonance seen throughout the play where it uses a combination of both comedic and tragic elements. Linda Woodbridge for example, has called the play a revenge comedy (Bernard 2). The play makes it clear from the beginning that it is not only comical with a forceful showing of melancholy with the character Antonio (Margolis 88).

The melancholy that Antonio shows is present throughout the play and counters the common expectations one would have when watching a comedy. While Bassanio is trying his best to better his situation, Antonio seems content with his gloomy existence and does nothing to change how things are for him. This ordeal with Antonio and his continued presence throughout the play darkens the play and fills it with melancholy and sadness (Bernard 10). Antonio is however not a figure that is encouraged to laugh at, but his situation of melancholy is made fun of through another character, namely when Portia rejects Palatine and ridicule his sadness in act 1 scene 2 (Bernard 11). It is a relatively foul thing to find humour and pleasure in other people's sadness; however, in this case it is used

for comedic effect where one is encouraged to laugh at his sad misery through Portia's jests and demeanour. Even though Palatine is a minor character that does not appear again after this, this shows how he at least does not get a happy ending as people laugh at his melancholic feelings when he does not get to marry Portia.

As an ending in a comedy would suggest, one would think that Antonio's sadness would be cured. However, this does not seem to be the case. The play ends rather joyfully with the pairing of six characters, but it leaves Antonio alone. However, he does receive some good news when he receives a letter telling him his ships have returned. Still this news is not enough for his sadness to be purged as he has previously stated that there is no correlation between his sadness and his business. This seems to leave Antonio at the end of the play just as melancholic as when the play started, leaving the play with a happy ending for most, but with a melancholic sting from Antonio (Bernard 14 - 15). This shows how even though Antonio was not a character that relied on humour and was never in a position where he was made fun of, he still managed to get an ending deprived of a profound happy feeling. However, he does not get an ending that is any worse from where he started either which often seems to be the case for those characters that are being made fun of in a darker way.

The last act of *The Merchant of Venice* has a lot of comic potential, but none of it is connected to Antonio. In fact, the ending of the play is focusing on lighter themes and more digestible forms of humour like the revealing of the ring trick and how Bassanio and Gratiano clumsily try their best to regain their beloved's favour. When Antonio enters the picture and again tries to bind his life to Bassanio's word, he seems very out of touch with the rest of the ending (Bernard 14). Shakespeare could have integrated forms of comedy including Antonio here, even dark humour at the expense of Antonio and his clumsy claim to sacrifice his life in this otherwise uplifting and humorous scene. Instead, "Portia ignores Antonio's claim and rapidly puts an end to the jest by revealing the trick behind the ingenious deception, underscoring the heteroclitie presence of Antonio in the process" (Bernard 14). By doing this, the ending focuses on happy and joyful things and leaves little room for Antonio and other darker themes by trying to not dwell on Antonio's sacrifice in the trial and him again trying to offer the same sacrifice in the end. Even when Antonio brings forth his good news of his ships having returned, "Portia has neither the time nor the interest to acknowledge Antonio's appreciation, as the comedy turns to a celebration of marriage in its

closing moments” (Bernard 15). Very clearly the play wants to have a happy ending. It turns to focus on marital bliss, and it lets the lovers marry like a classic romantic comedy. There is no more acceptance for darker themes or darker humour.

Compared to Antonio, Shylock is a character that is more linked with comedy in the play. The part of the play that is most void of comedy is the trial that takes place in act 4. This is the most dramatic part of the play, and tensions are really high for a long time. Nevertheless, Shakespeare manages to keep a comedic overtone with comments from Gratiano where he imitates Shylock’s cheering, except here he mocks Shylock while he praises the judge. With Shylock first commending the Judge for his just decision which essentially gives him the right to kill Antonio. With outbursts like – “O noble judge! O excellent young man!” (*MV. IV. i. 256*) and “Tis very true. O wise and upright judge, / how much elder art thou than thy looks! (*MV. IV. i. 260 – 261*). The then sudden shift when the judge reveals that in claiming his pound of flesh, he would also forfeit his own life can give a remarkable relief. Gratiano then proceeds to quip “O upright judge! -Mark, Jew. -O learned judge!” (*MV. IV. i. 326*) over and over which greatly resembles Shylock’s cheering just moments earlier. This relief, the outbursts and Shylock’s ultimate embarrassment and humiliation paves way for laughter at the expense of Shylock having essentially ruined and almost killed himself in his own bloodlust and apparent greed.

Shylock and Antonio are vastly different characters that serve very different means in the play. Shylock being the overarching antagonist is in a position where he is being made fun of and the fact that he suffers is seen as something humorous and good by the other characters. This is also evident in the ending. Even though Antonio does not get a particularly happy ending, his life is in order just as it was when the play started. Shylock who is the character that is being pulled through the mud and laughed at is left with a worse fate. Barely being left alive and with nothing left to his name. Even though Shylock is seen as the antagonist, he is still a human being who is left with a fate he sees as worse than dying and one that any human would struggle to live with.

Even though Shylock is deemed the antagonist of the play, I would not describe him as a villain. The play in itself can on a superficial level be described as a romantic comedy. Two lovers overcome various obstacles where they defeat Shylock and his threat to Antonio before they celebrate their union in marriage. However, Shylock, while being the antagonist he is also made the emotional centre by Shakespeare (Margolies 87). Ridsen points to the

fact that in our modern world, we have a lot of sympathy for children, be it if they are abused or not. This makes it so that we often easily believe what we hear them say. Never do we see Shylock do any harm to his daughter, he only tried to raise her without her mother and keep her safe from a dangerous society (Ridsen 16). When Shylock first learn of her elopement, we do not actually know what he said. We are only told what Solanio says that Shylock said. Solanio, being a friend of Antonio and a typical citizen of Venice, he has clear prejudice against Jews, and he is not a reliable witness (Ridsen 16). If one sticks to the facts of the play and try to not believe the unreliable opinions that we hear throughout the play, there is little evidence to support the claim that Shylock is an especially villainous or evil person. Even greedy can be a hard adjective to pin on Shylock. Whatever others say of him, we do not actually know if he practices any flagrant usury. We do not actually know if he makes more profit on his loans than Antonio does on his merchantry, or if he makes more money than Bassanio would make by loaning money from Antonio in order for him to marry a rich girl he barely knows (Ridsen 16).

Shylock having his daughter steal from him and run away with a Christian man, he suffers great sorrow and grief. This sorrow can be hard to sympathize with due to his coarse manners and all the judgement everyone seems to have on him. However, he has essentially lost his last and only family member; he has lost his own and his family's future and with that the reason he had for gaining wealth. The picture of Shylock is not very flatteringly painted by Shakespeare, and it is not a particularly positive one. However, he did not create the negative picture that many seem to bring as an assumption to the play either. Instead, Shakespeare created a sympathetic one, where the Christian Venetians do not do much either to recommend themselves (Ridsen 16 - 17).

Close reading *The Merchant of Venice* can help remove false assumptions about the play, while it hinders us to draw quick and simple conclusions. "In *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare leaves us with little that we *know* beyond a few verifiable events that we see onstage" (Ridsen 18) This makes it so that we have to determine the characters feelings and intentions based on what little we see of them on stage, and it might prove elusive.

"The popular recognition of the revenger's role gives Shylock some emotional authority: the revenger, until the end, is a hero, and his villainous behaviour is less an obstacle to public approbation than it might appear. Revenge and also jealousy are

the most intense themes of the culture of the age, and audience involvement with the theme is enhanced by the language of the heroes which conveys their intensity and gives them colour beyond that of daily life” (Margolis 95 -96).

Shylock having the role as a revenger and one that seeks Antonio`s downfall is thus not necessarily something that makes Shylock`s downfall a pleasing fall to the audience. Shylock has on several occasions made clear his despise for Antonio and given reasons and justification for it that seem very reasonable. This is made very clear in the “hath a dog money” speech where he gives a great list of despicable things Antonio has done to him. Antonio has on several occasions abused Shylock by spitting on him, calling him a dog and other abusive insults. It is hard to blame Shylock for disliking Antonio. Especially when Antonio does not deny what Shylock says, essentially admitting to doing those things and even saying that he would do it again.

The ultimate fall of Shylock and the lack of a clear antagonist in him thus hinders the play from achieving the happy ending it could have had if Shylock had not been as sympathetic and human. Margolis goes so far as to say that the long build up in the trial scene and the expectation of a bloody conclusion is frustrated and that one can feel slightly let down when Portia, or Balthazar, enters saying the bond is void. Even though the humane position wins as Antonio gets to live, Shylocks defeat is the ruin of the dramatic hero. The fact that Shylock is so well developed makes him one of Shakespeare`s most human characters, and he is in the contradictory position of being both abhorrent and the hero in his role as main determinant and as someone we can identify ourselves in (Margolis 103). This makes the downfall of Shylock an unpleasant one, and a very brutal one at that. It ends up overshadowing the otherwise happy marriages that conclude the play and makes it so that they feel irrelevant and unjust. Instead of enjoying the overthrowing of the villain, we end up pitying him, which shows the ambiguity of the play (Margolis 109).

Inspecting the romantic relationships and marriages in *The Merchant of Venice* closely will reveal that they are not as solid or happy as they might seem with a superficial viewing of the play. Taking into consideration how Bassanio and Portia got together, one can see that they have only superficial reasons for wanting to marry. Portia has slandered multiple suitors that have failed the casket game, but she wants Bassanio to succeed purely based on his looks (Risden 21). Bassanio gives his reasons to Antonio as to why he wants to



travel to Belmont, which is that there is a rich and fair lady there. The joining of Bassanio and Portia is then not the result of love, but rather that of lust and greed. While it is explained in the play that if he truly loves her, he will open the one casket that contains her portrait. The problem is that there are only three different caskets to choose from, meaning that anyone that were there to choose had a relatively high chance of “accidentally” picking the right casket, and Bassanio could have just been lucky.

Portia also struggles with herself in deciding if she should tell Bassanio which casket is the right casket, but because she does not want to undermine her deceased father's will, she decides not to help in any way. Nevertheless, she does give him several hints when declaring that he should take his time while choosing and saying that “I am locked in one of them. / If you do love me, you will find me out” (*MV*. 3. 2. 43 – 44). The song that plays during his inspection of the caskets are also giving slight hints to which casket he should choose. The casket containing her picture is made out of lead, and it is then probably not a coincidence that the first three lines ends with words that clearly sound like and rhymes with the word lead, such as bread and head (Risden 21). This hinting makes it feel like Bassanio has won Portia by her breaking her bond with her father, both in spirit and through her hinting. They have both won what they wanted, Portia her good looking man and Bassanio his wealth, but they were not driven by love. He managed to choose with help the other suitors did not have. It makes the pairing seem undeserved and it is hard to tell if Bassanio shows any real regard for Portia at the end of the play and if he will stay loyal to her.

The parting of the rings also shows how lightly the characters take their relationships. Here, both Bassanio and Gratiano surrender their rings at the first chance they are given, even though they have both swore to never part from them. It is very strange to part so lightly with a love token. Not many would give away their wedding ring, even if someone had helped your friend a great deal. For someone to even request such a ring from someone would be seen as very disrespectful and inappropriate. The easy parting with the rings indicates that neither Bassanio nor Gratiano are likely to stay faithful, as Shakespeare also demonstrates with Cressida parting with her sleeve in *Troilus and Cressida* (Risden 28).

Bassanio shows immediately after being confronted about the ring that he is willing to lie to Portia when he says in an aside that he should have said that he lost it by defending it. Bassanio pleads and begs for forgiveness as he admits that he no longer has the ring only when he knows that he had no valid excuse for parting with it. Portia forgives him, and he

promises loyalty and faithfulness. However, as he has not yet been able to keep his word, why should we now believe him? The same goes for Gratiano. "Marriage in the world of *The Merchant of Venice* suggests neither comedy, a happy ending, nor tragedy, the fall of worthy persons guilty mistakes, only another source of problems" (Ridsen 29).

Out of all of Shakespeare's plays, *Troilus and Cressida* is arguably the one that is the most difficult to characterize. It has through the times been called a comedy, a tragedy and a history (Morris 481). It lacks any clarity of genre whatsoever, which makes it difficult for the audience and readers to orient themselves and build expectations to the ending. On the other hand, you have *All's Well That Ends Well* that has a clear comic structure, but the ending comes in and contradicts the comedic form (Margolies 113).

Marvick explores the play *Troilus and Cressida* where he discusses the ending, the different characters and the use of black humour, especially through the character Thersites. He argues that the ending of the play is ambiguous, as it can be seen as both hopeful where Troilus will be ennobled by Hector's death, or as negative where Chaos and blood triumphs over order and judgement (Marvick). He also argues that the action of the play is very ambiguous and is often portrayed heroic and at the same time pathetically comic. He uses the example where Troilus awaits his first meeting with Cressida, where his speech can be seen as both an affirmation of love and as "the greedy salivation of an erotic gourmet" (Marvick).

Thersites, with his black wit and his constant spewing of grim speech is the most central role in *Troilus and Cressida* when it comes to black humour. Interestingly, Marvick compares Troilus to Thersites. He points to how the play ends with a bitter and vengeful Troilus, who now has a malignant cunning just like Thersites. In Thersites, this quality has always been harmless and therefore also laughable. However, in Troilus, this quality is mixed with both dedication and power, and it can make his future uncomfortable to contemplate. It has made Thersites' vulgar speeches seem almost too black for laughter (Marvick).

Thersites' insults may also seem funny at first until one realises that what he says is both very mean and very true. No matter how much the audience or reader is going into this play thinking it is another Trojan War heroic, their sense of heroism will more than likely be undermined by Thersites' grim spewing. In his railing, he slices the noble heroes down to nothing but violent, cocky and selfish bullies and tarts (Margolis 135) (Ridsen 44). None of the characters in *Troilus and Cressida* garners any real sympathy from the audience as none

of them have a particularly admirable character. Not even Troilus or Cressida is presented to be sympathetic, and it shows right from the beginning. Troilus is seen in act 1 weeping and moping about his heartache and lust for Cressida, while Cressida in scene 2 is saying nothing but mean and insulting things about Troilus to Pandarus, when he tries to match them together. This makes them all very unappealing (Risden 45). Throughout the play, we do not see any characters behave good enough for them to deserve anything good, and everything in the play's world slowly turns into nothing but chaos and emptiness (Risden 46).

Achilles acts like a selfish brute and thug that is only concerned with his own pride, and Ajax is nothing other than a dumbed down version of Achilles. Hector might be the one coming closest to being anything good with his obsession for honour, but he fails his own sense of honour as he murders a Greek because of his shiny armour and decides stupidly to rest on the battlefield where he is promptly killed by Achilles and the myrmidons. These are just few examples of stupid, unappealing and un noble acts that the characters all are perpetrators of.

As it is hard to place the play in a specific genre or in any genre at all, it can also be difficult to grasp where Shakespeare is heading with the play. Is the play about the hindered romance of *Troilus and Cressida*, which is also the name of play? Is it a dramatization of Hector's defeat? Or is it a showing of the Trojan War? No matter which narrative one decides to follow, Shakespeare denies giving a conclusion to any of them. None of the storylines are completed, and there is no crisis point and no resolution whatsoever for the romantic title storyline as it simply stops (Margolis 136). If the resolution to this story is the failing of promised love and Troilus switching from love to hate, it is incomplete since the characters do not come together and when the play continues it is made irrelevant. If one chooses to follow the military storyline and seek some resolution there, here too the play ends before it is finished (Margolis 136).

By not being offered a proper conclusion to any of the storylines and not being offered any resolution, one is also here left with trying to see what would happen after the closing of the curtains to see if anything happy, good or bad will happen. As Troilus has been described as a fierce and skilled warrior from the very beginning of the play and since he is the brother of Hector, Troilus is the one to take the role of leader in the Trojan army after Hector's death (Morris 487). After Troilus discovered that Cressida was unfaithful to him

with Diomedes, he resumed to be the fierce warrior that he was before the play's beginning and before his moping about Cressida. Troilus describes his newly born hate by saying:

“Hark, Greek: As much as I do Cressid love, / So much by weight hate I her  
Diomed. / That sleeve is mine that he'll bear on his helm / Were it a casque  
composed by Vulcan's skill, / My sword should bite it” (*Tro.* 5. 2. 197 – 200)

Now his love for Cressida has turned into hate for Diomedes as Troilus again decides to fight the Greek in order for him to face Diomedes. However, not long after, he again turns his focused hate for Diomedes into a hate for all Greeks when he is scolding Hector for his chivalry and merciful behaviour on the battlefield, since he would spare some of the Grecians he fights (Morris 487). “When many times the captive Grecian falls, / Even in the fan and wind of your fair sword, / You bid them rise and Live” (*Tro.* 5. 3. 43 – 45). Hector replies that this is only fair game when Troilus ruthlessly replies “Fool's play, by heaven. Hector.” (*Tro.* 5. 3. 47). This scolding really shows how Troilus has changed into something hateful, and his hatred is all directed to the Greek whom they are fighting. This merciless and immense hatred is then put to power after Hector's death, and it does not look like the war is ending any time soon where there will be more senseless deaths and fighting. Even Troilus himself is not expected to live long, as he himself anticipates his own death when he says, “I say at once: let your brief plagues be mercy, / And linger not our sure destructions on!” (*Tro.* 5. 5. 9 – 10) (Morris 489).

There is not much positivity to find in this play, and there is certainly not much positivity or happiness to find in its ending either. “Honourable” Hector dies and is ruthlessly dragged across the battlefield, and his now merciless and brutal brother Troilus is in command, who is not even expected to live much longer. At the end of the play, the characters who are still alive are just as pathetic as they were in the rest of the play, if not even more pathetic. Even if the play had tried to end in a more positive manner, it would probably not lead to what could be considered a deserved happy ending, as all the darkness and grim events that precede the ending would have overshadowed it. And they do overshadow the notion that one could be hopeful as Troilus steps in command and is ennobled by the death of Hector.

Shakespeare often uses epilogues to conclude different plays and often uses them to round them off in a manner that confirms the attitude of the plays (Margolis 136). It can also be said that Shakespeare did this in *Troilus and Cressida*, because indeed the epilogue confirms the thorough negativity that permeates the play. This is the absolute final scene, and Pandarus addresses the audience alone on the stage. He is very hostile as he basically calls the audience sexual debauchers and describes the audience as to have syphilis. He also explains that he himself will be dead in a few months and that he will “at that time bequeath you my diseases” (*Tro.* 5. 11. 59). These are not pleasant words to hear, especially not when they are directed directly at you, the audience. As Margolis says, “It is a fitting end but probably one that makes it more comfortable to be a reader than a spectator of the play” (Margolis 137). You are then after the end left with no relief and no catharsis from a world that turns from bad to even worse. It is difficult to argue that *Troilus and Cressida* has a happy ending on any level, because the negativity and toxicity is so thoroughgoing and overwhelming throughout the whole play.

As I went into this thesis, I believed that all of these plays had endings that could be justifiably called happy. However, I now see that these plays are indeed troublesome and present the audience or reader with emotions that might not coincide with the happenings of the play. Very clearly *All's Well That Ends Well* follows a natural comedic form and it ends like a classic comedy on the surface, with a grand event and the joining of Bertram and Helena. However, much like in *The Merchant of Venice* this marriage feels very off putting and one is left with no assurance but a narrator telling you that all has ended well. The bed trick has really made its mark on the play, and it is difficult to shake the immoral action and to forgive Helena for being so intrusive and obsessive. The overall actions of the different characters make them unlikeable, and in order for Bertram and Helena to stay happy after the seemingly happy ending that is presented, they will have to change drastically.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the biggest sinner in keeping the ending from being happy compared to *All's Well That Ends Well's* ending, is the portrayal of the antagonist Shylock and not necessarily the marriage and romance. Even though that also certainly plays a part in it. The downfall of Shylock undermines the entire plot of romance and gives eerie feelings to the audience and readers as he is unjustly stripped of everything to his name. For today's standards, it is also extremely anti-Semitic to strip Shylock of his Jewish religion and force Christianity upon him, which makes his downfall that much more heart breaking. However,

the romantic relationships and the marriages in the ending are not without fault either. They feel very irrelevant to the play and there is no assurance that neither Bassanio, Gratiano or Lorenzo will stay faithful and loving to their new wives. The main romance between Bassanio and Portia is unjust, and it is based on looks and wealth instead of true love which could have helped seal a promising future after the end of the play. This, together with the downfall of Shylock and the weird melancholic Antonio makes the ending upsetting, and it does not present the happy ending one could expect from this type of play.

*Troilus and Cressida* is undeniably the darkest play with the least happy ending in this collection. It features few, if any redeemable characters as all of them spew nonsense and are extremely caught up with themselves. Here too, the main romance between Troilus and Cressida feels very off. In contrast however, here it does not end up in marriage, but it simply stops as Cressida is unfaithful and Troilus enters a mode of rage towards the end. The play ends overall with nothing positive, except for the ennobling of Troilus. However, even this is not a basis for a happy ending as what led to his ennobling was the death of Hector and it means that Troilus is now a merciless brutal leader that will lead to countless deaths on both sides together with his own inevitable death.

All the plays feature such dark themes and rely on dark humour in a way that it prevents the endings from being happy. Be it they are three very different plays, the way all of them present their characters with their actions and motivations make it so the plays do not reach a conclusion that is happy in the eyes of the audience or reader, nor arguably for the characters in the plays. The suffering of good characters and the questionable and unlikely romances make the endings feel ill at place, unrealistic and unjust as they would seem to not work after the closing of the curtains. All in all, every play can be said to have a happy ending on a superficial level, but with a second look, one is not as easily deceived by Shakespeare's immaculate writing.

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