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The Architecture of Obsession: Limerence and Reciprocal Determinism in All's Well that Ends Well

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ABSTRACT

All's Well That Ends Well has been classified among Shakespeare's "problem plays," due to its ethically uncomfortable premise and an ending that resists clean resolution. Central to this discomfort is Helena, a character who has divided critics and audiences for centuries — read alternately as an admirably persistent heroine and as a deeply troubling figure. This paper argues that the latter reading is more psychologically accurate. Through the application of Tennov's (1979) theory of limerence and Bandura's (1978, 1986) framework of reciprocal determinism, Helena's pursuit of Bertram is examined not as romantic persistence but as a clinically recognisable pattern of obsessive attachment, sustained and escalated by a socially enabling environment. Textual analysis reveals the presence of core limerence markers — intrusive cognition, non-substitutability of the limerent object, idealization, and behavioural escalation under rejection — across key scenes of the play. Further, the triadic interaction of person, behaviour, and environment demonstrates that Helena's limerence does not self-correct precisely because her social world is structured to prevent it from doing so. The paper concludes that the play inadvertently stages the conditions under which limerence becomes chronic, with implications for understanding rejection-triggered aggression and the psychology of obsessive pursuit.

***Keywords**: Architecture, Obsession, Limerence, Reciprocal, Obsessive Pursuit.*

Introduction

All's Well That Ends Well is still considered one of Shakespeare's "problem plays" as it presents ethically uncomfortable situations which are resolved rather parsimoniously. Adapted from a tale in Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, the story follows Helena, a low-bornward who is in love with a high-born noble named Bertram. She cures the King of France of his illness, and as a reward, wishes to marry Bertram. However, Bertram rejects her because of her lower social status and goes off to war, while giving Helena a series of impossible tasks to complete if she wants him to accept her as his wife.

Helena has divided audiences and critics over centuries. While some view her as a sympathetic figure, doing her best to win the love and trust of the person she is deeply in love with, other critics argue that the actions she performs are characteristic of an obsessed and troubled individual. However, upon analysing her character arc and her behaviour throughout the play through a social psychological lens, her being viewed as a sympathetic figure doesn't hold up.

This paper argues that Helena's behaviour through the play transcends romantic persistence and is more accurately understood through the concept of Limerence given by Tennov (1979)- which is operating within an enabling environment, sustained and escalated through Bandura's (1986) framework of reciprocal determinism. Rather than being a sympathetic protagonist, Helen emerges as a

psychologically complex individual, whose escalated pursuit reveals what occurs when mechanisms that would naturally self-correct are continuously enabled by the social environment.

Literature Review

The play cannot be understood without analysing the socio-political environment of early 17th century England. As noted by Fraser (1984), this society was rigidly hierarchical, with the nobility and gentry at the top, followed by merchants and yeomen, and the rural poor forming the vast majority. This class barrier, and the psychological weight of attempting tocross it, are evident in Helena's thinking from the opening scenes of the play.

The play has been widely classified as a "problem play" by literary critics, though the grounds for this classification differ significantly across scholars. Lawrence (1969) argues that what appears most problematic to modern audiences — an unwilling husband tricked into consummating a marriage — was neither unusual nor unethical for an early seventeenth century audience familiar with medieval folk traditions, and that judging the play by contemporary moral standards does it a disservice. Tillyard (1950), however, is considerably more critical, arguing that Bertram's sudden acceptance of Helena at the end fails to provide a satisfying resolution to the moral and dramatic tension the play has accumulated, and that this failure reflects a deeper structural tension in the work itself.

Gerstell (2015) examines the play through an economic and transactional lens, arguing that self-interest governs not only male-female relationships but also those between women, and that service — conceived as both economic and sexual — drives the central "problem" of the play. While this framework usefully illuminates why figures such as the Widow and Diana cooperate with Helena's scheme, it does not address the psychological compulsion that drives Helena's pursuit in the first place, nor why that pursuit escalates rather than extinguishes under sustained rejection.

Snyder (1988) moves closer to this psychological dimension, identifying Helena as an "active, desiring subject" and locating the structural problem of the play in the difficulty of accommodating a woman who desires and pursues. Snyder highlights the gaps and shifts in Helena's agency as evidence of a deeper emotional and psychological struggle, suggesting that the text's ambiguities point toward something that purely literary analysis has not fully resolved. The present study extends this by identifying the precise psychological nature of Helena's desire — as limerence in the clinical sense established by Tennov (1979) — and the environmental mechanisms through which that desire is sustained and escalated rather than corrected.

Method

The present study employs qualitative textual analysis as its primary method. The primary source used was the Arden Shakespeare edition (second series) of All's Well That Ends Well. Qualitative textual analysis is appropriate here because it allows for the systematic examination of a character's cognition, behaviour, and social environment as represented across a dramatic text, without reducing the complexity of either the psychological frameworks or the literary material.

Although Helena is a fictional character, the application of psychological frameworks to literary subjects is an established methodological approach. Literary fiction functions as an abstraction and simulation of social experience (Mar & Oatley, 2008), and literary characters offer consistent, textually bounded behavioural data that can be systematically analysed against clinical and theoretical constructs. This approach allows for the examination of psychological phenomena without the ethical constraints associated with primary data collection on living subjects.

Textual evidence was extracted from key scenes in chronological order and analysed through two complementary theoretical lenses: Tennov's (1979) framework of limerence and Bandura's (1978, 1986) model of reciprocal determinism. Analysis proceeded by identifying specific passages where Helena's cognition, behaviour, and social environment correspond to the clinical and theoretical markers established in the framework section, and interpreting these passages in relation to one another to trace the escalating pattern of her pursuit across the play.

Theoretical Framework

Limerence (Tennov, 1979) is the presence of involuntary and intrusive cognition directed towards another individual, called the limerent object (LO), which the limerent individual experiences largely beyond self-control. It is not transferable to another individual and the limerent individual seeks reciprocation specifically from the LO. It is not sustained by consistent positive signals from the LO, but

by intermittent reinforcement, wherein ambiguous or occasional responses from the LO are misinterpreted as hopeful, thus perpetuating the cycle. This is important, because the fear of rejection by the LO is more intense than the longing itself, because outright rejection would collapse the fantasy and make this state cognitively unsustainable.

Limerence should not be confused with similar terms, like love, which is characterised by stable attachment and comfort. Another term, lust, refers to physical desire, while it can be present in limerence, is not its core driver. Infatuation is usually short-lived and is seen as normal, whereas limerence is its deeper, clinical version. Other states, like erotomania are characterised by delusional belief of reciprocation, limerence retains reality testing and often dissolves if met with outright rejection.

Reciprocal Determinism (Bandura, 1978, 1986) proposes that an individual's behaviour emerges as a result of constant and continuous interaction among three factors - the person(P), behaviour (B) and environment (E). Each element influences and is influenced by the other elements. Person represents the internal factors - emotions, cognitive processes expectations, attitudes etc. Environment represents the external context, which encompasses the physical environment, social settings, cultural norms, institutional settings and the responses of other individuals. Behaviour - what an individual does, is not only an output; it influences the person (what or how they think about themselves) and the environment (how others perceive this behaviour and thus how they perceive the actor).

Although Helena is a fictional character, the application of psychological frameworks to literary subjects is an established methodological approach in psychological humanities research. Literary characters offer consistent, textually bounded behavioural data that can be systematically analysed against clinical and theoretical constructs. This method allows for the examination of psychological phenomena without the ethical constraints associated with primary data collection on living subjects.

Limerence in Helena – Textual Evidence

From the start of the play, it is visible that due to limerence, intrusive cognition displaces everything else. In Act 1 Scene 1, Helena's crying is interpreted by the others to be about her father's demise. But she mentions that she is crying for Bertram. "*I think not on my father; / And these great tears grace his remembrance more / Than those I shed for him. What was he like? / I have forgot him: my imagination / Carries no favour in't but Bertram's*". Bertram hashijacked her cognition to the point of displacing active grief.

"*I am undone: there is no living, none, / If Bertram be away. 'Twere all one / That I should love a bright particular star / And think to wed it, he is so above me*." Helena knows that the class gap between her and Bertram is too big. She is dreaming of the impossible, and this gap between knowing and doing is the limerence signature. At this point, Helena's entire existence is contingent on Bertram. She doesn't want "a" husband. She only wants Bertramas her husband, despite other options implicitly existing.

Her saying "*my idolatrous fancy / Must sanctify his relics*" is a clear and direct indication of idealization of the LO. She is using "idolatrous" – religious language for an individual whoat this point doesn't care about her. This shows that Helena can't see Bertram objectively as a person; she sees him as someone to be worshipped.

Act 1 Scene 3 presents us with a case of what happens when there is a cognitive threat to the limerent fantasy. Despite the countess – who, by now knows that Helena is in love with herson, telling Helena that she is like a mother to her ("*You know, Helen, I am a mother to you*."), Helena rejects her, replying "*Mine honourable mistress*." Helena is becoming visibly distressed (as can be inferred from the countess saying "*When I said "a mother", Me thought you saw a serpent.*") because this would reclassify Bertram as her brother which is a hugethreat to her limerent fantasy. The primacy and non-substitutability of the LO is being challenged in this scene, and she cleverly uses the class gap between them to rationalise this rejection and drive home the point that Bertram can't be her brother ("*The Count Rossillion cannot be my brother. I am from humble, he from honoured name; / My master, my dear lord he is; and I His servant live, and will his vassal die. He must not be my brother/ So I were not his sister. Can't no other But, I your daughter, he must be my brother?*")

"I know I love in vain, strive against hope; / Yet in this captious and intenible sieve / I still pour in the waters of my love / And lack not to lose still." Helena is giving the clearest clinical limerence description here. She explicitly acknowledges the futility of what she is striving and hoping for, yet she explicitly continues anyway.

In Act 2 Scene 3, after Helena is miraculously able to cure the king of France, he offers her to choose any noble man among those present in the court. Helena choses Bertram specifically when she has the choice to choose anyone. (*"I dare not say I take you, but I give, Me and my service, ever whilst I live, Into your guiding power. This is the man"*). Despite Bertram's almost visceral reaction and verbal rejection of her,, to the extent he says he "would rather behated forever" than marry her *("My wife, my liege! I shall beseech your highness, In such a business give me leave to use. The help of mine own eyes. / But never hope to know why I should marry her. / A poor physician's daughter my wife! Disdain Rather corrupt me ever!")*,she still wants him. This shows non-substitutability of the LO.

The next few scenes show Helena's escalating behaviour under rejection. In Act 2 Scene 4, Helena tells Parolles that she will be obedient to her husband's will ("*In every thing I wait upon his will.*"). Bertram wants her to go back to Rossillion while he goes to fight a battle, which is a clear indication from his side that he doesn't want to be with her. In Act 2 Scene 5, Helena asks for a kiss from Bertram ("*But, like a timorous thief, most fain would steal What law does vouch mine own. / Faith yes; Strangers and foes do sunder, and not kiss.*"). If shegets her wish, it will exponentially increase her limerence, but Bertram rejects it. However, instead of testing her resolve or helping her break-out of her limerent state, she takes it up as\ a challenge – she will make Bertram reciprocate her feelings for him.

In Act 3 Scene 2, Bertram tells his mother that he will not accept Helena as his wife at any cost ("*she hathrecovered the king, and undone me. I have wedded her, not bedded her; and sworn to make the 'not' eternal. / if there be breadth enough in the world, I will hold a long distance.*"). He has vowed to run and stay away as far as possible from Helena, and has put forward impossible conditions for her if she wants to be his wife – where she has to get hisancestral ring and bear his child (*"When thou canst get the ring upon my finger which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten 60 of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband: but in such a 'then' I write a 'never.'*")

In the next few acts, Helena's escalating behaviour under rejection can be witnessed. First, inAct 3 Scene 4, she lies to the countess that she is leaving for pilgrimage ("*I am Saint Jaques' pilgrim, thither gone*"), whereas in truth she wants to follow Bertram. In Act 3 Scenes 6 and 7, she befriends a widow, whose daughter – Diana, is being courted by Bertram – in a falseguise. Then, she bribes the widow to have Diana accept Bertram's advances so that she could take her place on the bed with him. The "bed trick" is being planned here.

The behavioural escalation culminates with the bed trick. In Act 4, Scene 2, Bertram gives Diana her ring and she tells him to visit her at midnight. In Act 4, Scene 3, the trick actually occurs off-stage. This act is unethical, non-consensual and even illegal by modern standards. Bertram agrees to sleep with Diana, and the partner he has consented with is replaced, making the whole act non-consensual where he is the victim. For Helena however, this is all "fair and lawful". As we will see in the next section, this sentiment is shared by both Dianaand her mother, which enables Helena to go through with this plan.

Act 5 Scene 3 presents the audience with an unresolved ending. While literary critics have debated whether the ending is complete or some parts of it are missing, with the material we have available, Bertram's sudden acceptance of Helena is conditional. ("*If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly.*") It is still not reciprocative of Helena's feelings. He has been caught red-handed and does not have much choice but to accept what the kings want from him – to accept Helena as his wife.

Reciprocal Determinism: The Enabling Architecture

As discussed in the theoretical framework section, Bandura's (1978, 1986) triadic model of reciprocal determinism proposes that it is impossible to understand behaviour in isolation. Instead, it emerges from a constant and continuous interaction between the person (P), their behaviour (B) and the environment (E). in Helena's case, this framework is useful to explain not only what she does, but also why her limerence escalates rather than extinguishes – as it would under consistent rejections from Bertram.

The person component is evident and clearly visible in Helena's cognition throughout the play. She consistently reframes obstacles as problems to be solved rather than signals to stopor retreat. For instance, Bertram's impossible conditions — acquiring his ancestral ring and bearing his child — are not interpreted as final rejection, but as a challenge to be met. Further, her idealization of Bertram as discussed in the previous section, further insulates her cognition from contradictory evidence. His flaws are attributed to external corrupting influences rather than dispositional character, and her ethically

questionable actions are self-justified as "lawful." These cognitive patterns do not emerge in a vacuum — they are sustained and reinforced by what the environment returns to her.

This is where the environment component becomes the most analytically significant element of the triadic model in Helena's case. At every stage where natural consequences could have functioned as a corrective and thus dissolving her fantasy, the environment intervenes on Helena's behalf. At first, the King overrides Bertram's refusal and forces the marriage. The Countess, Bertram's own mother, sides with Helena and disowns her son. The Widow and Diana, fully aware of the deceptive nature of the bed trick, assist Helena regardless. Not only assistance, they provide essential reinforcement by calling her act lawful. Finally, the King accepts Helena's fulfilment of Bertram's conditions in Act 5 and compels Bertram's acceptance. What is striking is not any single instance of enabling, but the cumulative pattern— nobody stops her. The social and institutional order consistently prioritises the preservation of the marriage contract over the autonomy and consent of the individuals within it, thereby removing every circuit breaker that would otherwise interrupt the limerent cycle.

Gersell (2015) gives a compelling argument about the economic impact of and on the environment. The cooperation of the widow and Diana is not due to shared moral conviction or solidarity. It has been explicitly purchased. The widow yields only upon receiving a purse of gold and a promise of further monetary incentives. Helena's financial resources, themselves bestowed by the King and Countess, function as the mechanism through which the environment is structured to accommodate her escalating behaviour. The limerent cycle isnot simply enabled by the passivity of those around her — it is actively facilitated by a system in which compliance is a commodity.

Another important aspect to understanding the environment is to look at the sociopolitical environment of 17th century England. According to Fraser (1984), a family – centred around married couple, was considered the basic “social, economic and political unit”. Marriage wasn’t only about two people; it represented the hierarchy constituted by God. The King and the Countess, especially the King – are using their social power to coerce Bertram into submission and acceptance, but they are also trying to protect the social fabric from the chaos of a broken marriage contract. They are not being nice to Helena, they are trying to impose God’s will onto Bertram by upholding his marriage.

Behaviour, the third component, is best understood in the context of this play as the mechanism connecting person and environment. Each behavioural escalation — curing theKing, following Bertram to Florence, befriending Diana under false pretences, orchestrating the bed trick — produces an environmental response that feeds back into Helena's cognition, validating her reframing and enabling the next escalation. Behaviour is therefore neither merely an output of Helena's psychology nor a simple response to her environment; it is theactive link that keeps the triadic cycle in motion. Taken together, the three components reveal that Helena's limerence is not simply a product of her individual psychology. It is structurally sustained by an environment that was never designed to say no.

Ethical and Psychological Implications

The bed trick pulled off by Helena is the biggest issue. It is non-consensual by any modern standards. Bertram clearly consents to sleeping with Diana, not Helena. This does not make Bertram a hero – he has flaws of his own. But two wrongs don’t make a right. The fact that others – the widow and Diana, or on it with her, despite knowing the plan, makes it worse. It cannot be determined clearly whether they have agreed to the plan because they believe it is lawful, or because they are trying to rationalise the bribe they have accepted from Helena. Cooperating with her allowed them to avoid the internal conflict of accepting a bribe while refusing to participate in the deception.

Bertram’s acceptance of Helena at the end of the play is psychologically unconvincing. *“If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, I’ll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly”* Bertram carefully chooses to say “if”. He has been coerced into accepting Helena by the king. The ending is ambiguous because Shakespeare couldn’t find a way to resolve it correctly, because there probably is no way to do so.

Another important point to note is that Helena isn’t operating in isolation. She is being enabled by a system that values the result or outcome (marriage, social order) over the process (coercion, deception). Even in scenes where she could have felt responsible for doing something she would regret, for instance, the deception involved in the bed trick, the reinforcement she gets from others also reduces her accountability for an action which she may be doubtful about, making it less probable that it could dissolve her limerence.

Conclusion

This study posits that Helena's obsession and pursuit of Bertram's reciprocation is best understood not as admirable persistence, but as limerence operating within an enabling environment, sustained and escalated through reciprocal determinism.

The broader implication is that the play inadvertently stages what happens when psychological mechanisms that would naturally self-correct are externally enabled and even celebrated. As Tennov mentions in her initial research – limerence can become chronic and disabling if left unchecked. The LO, in a fully crystallized limerent state, has become a near-total object of cognitive attention. When this fantasy is derailed, the limerent can experience atotal psychological collapse.

The play concludes with a social 'win' for Helena (and the king and the countess), but a psychological 'loss' for both. By forcing a resolution where Bertram is coerced and Helena's obsession is rewarded, the environment ensures that the limerent cycle remains unbroken. Rather than finding a healthy, stable attachment, they are locked into a relationship where the 'LO' (Bertram) remains an object of pursuit and the 'Limerent' (Helena) must constantly manage a fragile fantasy that has no basis in mutual consent.

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