All's Well That Ends Well: Where Is Violenta?

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A FEW SEMESTERS AGO while discussing All's Well with my undergraduate Shakespeare class, I called attention to the beginning of Act Three, scene five and the lead-in to Helena's arrival in Florence. I wanted to emphasize the gathering of female characters in this scene, and I read aloud the opening stage direction so that we could talk about who these people are. Using the Complete Pelican (1969) edition, I thus read: “Enter old Widow of Florence, her Daughter [Di­ana], Violenta, and Mariana, with other Citizens.” One of the more alert students, who happened to be following along in the Norton edition, raised his hand and asked for clarification. “Who is this Violenta?” he asked. “She's not in my text,” he added. Sure enough she had vanished from the Norton edition. I confess that I had not paid attention to this issue before, which I will attribute to having always used an edition that included Violenta. Mystified and possessing no clue about the textual problem (neither the Pelican nor the Norton edition offers any help), I fell back immediately on my several decades of teaching experience and suggested that this certainly looked like an interesting problem that we should all go away and think about. That time-worn strategy seemed to satisfy the few curious undergraduates, and it bought me some precious time. I knew that in all likelihood by the next class meeting two days hence everyone would have forgotten the alleged problem. I was right. But my own curiosity had been seriously piqued, and I set out on my quest for Violenta. Where is she? Why has she disappeared?

Violenta appears in the only early text of the play. The Folio stage direction reads: “Enter an old Widdow of Florence, her daughter,
Violenta and Mariana, with other citizens.” The text gives her no speaking part in the scene—hence the problem. The name Violenta, which appears nowhere else in English Renaissance drama, does appear again in the Folio as a misprint for Viola in *Twelfth Night*, the play that follows *All's Well* in the Folio. Susan Snyder in her 1993 Oxford edition of the play can serve conveniently to sum up the critical response to this apparent textual problem, which she sees as evidence of “revision and addition” and a sign of “authorial second thoughts” (Snyder 56). Snyder writes: “Violenta may be a vestigial first idea, a figure for whom Shakespeare found no use when actually writing the dialogue but whom he forgot to revise out completely” (56). Clearly Shakespeare does intend Diana who speaks, although the text does not name her in the stage directions. Snyder concludes: “*Violenta* is not a rejected first thought for a separate character but a rejected first idea for the name of the character who came to be called Diana, which Shakespeare forgot to alter when he changed the speech prefixes” (56). Against such theories it is hard to argue; nevertheless, I insist that Shakespeare intends Violenta to be in the text and that she need not disappear. I want first to offer a partial documentation of her disappearance from editions, allowing us to follow Violenta's fortunes across the centuries. Second, I will make a case for her inclusion on the basis of what she can offer the play thematically. Finally, I focus on the textual and editorial implications of Violenta's removal.

My partial survey of some forty-one editions of *All's Well*—single editions and in collected works—from the seventeenth century through the beginning of the twenty-first century reveals that overwhelmingly editors have retained Violenta, presumably in deference to the Folio text. But a sea change starts to occur in the late twentieth century, as increasingly editors begin to remove her from the text, sometimes without any explanation. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors regularly follow the Folio and retain Violenta, including, for example, Nicholas Rowe (1709), Alexander Pope and Waburton (1747), Samuel Johnson and George Steevens (1785), Steevens and Boydell (1802), Edmond Malone (1821), Charles Knight (1839), William Clark and William Wright (Globe edition 1864), J. Payne Collier (1870). One exception appears in a curious edition of 1778 with the following title page: “*All's Well, that Ends Well. A Comedy.*