

Love's Labor's Lost (Summer 2006)

Love's Labor's Lost is Shakespeare's contribution to the study of adolescence. Beneath their polished façades and abstruse voices, the play's characters inhabit that destabilizing realm from which few escape undamaged. Psychologically, emotionally, there are no adults in Navarre; the visiting Princess of France comes nearest, though the sudden death of her father is necessary to jolt her into maturer cadences.

Little of this would surprise Berowne, easily the cleverest person onstage, though the inscrutable Rosaline seems to know him better than he knows himself. Not that he pushes himself very far, not when his present state is so comfortable. After all:

. . . why should proud summer boast
Before the birds have any cause to sing?
Why should I joy in any abortive birth?
At Christmas I no more desire a rose
Than wish a snow in May's newfangled shows,
But like of each thing that in season grows.

[I.i.102–7]

Time shall demand growth even from Berowne, of course, though the impetus for growth is decidedly unromantic. There is reason to believe that, not long after writing this play, Shakespeare chose to dramatize the ennobling power of love, in *Romeo and Juliet*.¹ In *Love's Labor's Lost*, by contrast (and as the title suggests), the end result of love is consistently negative, harsh, even cruel. No Shakespearean comedy prior to *Troilus and Cressida* (if indeed that play is a comedy) plunges from laughter to disquiet as rapidly as this one, and the most notable plungers are the four youths whose labors in love drive what little plot there is:

¹ Though some scholars date *Love's Labor's Lost* to the very beginning of Shakespeare's career—as early as 1588—I think only an artist firmly in command of his craft, and eager to test its limits, could have pulled off such a sophisticated, genre-busting play.

The Navarrese Academy

Love's Labor's Lost begins with the King of Navarre's grand proclamation to turn his court into "the wonder of the world; / . . . a little academe, / Still and contemplative in living art" [I.i.12–14]. With apologies to Shakespeare, I can clearly imagine the longtime pals—Berowne, Dumaine, Longaville, and King Ferdinand—lounging around the castle, drinking and laughing and generally engaging in a Renaissance bull session; as late night flowed, wine-like, to morning, someone—probably Berowne—said something to the effect of "think how witty we'd be if we'd paid attention in school." "But our teachers sucked!" Dumaine or Longaville replied. Whereupon the king leapt up: "I have it! We'll form our *own* school—and we'll learn *everything!*"

Berowne must have left for the bathroom here, because when the play begins he seems strangely ignorant of the scope of his friends' ambitions:

Berowne: Give me the paper, let me read the same,
 And to the strict'st decrees I'll write my name.
King: How well this yielding rescues thee from shame!
Berowne: "Item: that no woman shall come within a mile of my court—"
 Hath this been proclaimed?
Longaville: Four days ago.
Berowne: Let's see the penalty. "—on pain of losing her tongue." Who
 devised this penalty?
Longaville: Marry, that did I.

[I.i.116–124]

Following this line, the actors playing Longaville and Dumaine should burst into laughter and elbow each other's ribs—no doubt Longaville takes great pride in having devised such a deliciously absurd punishment. Berowne continues reading: "if any man be seen to talk with a woman within the term of three years, he shall endure such public shame as the rest of the court can possibly devise" [I.i.127–9]. Clearly this law was passed in the

express hope someone would break it, though the framers were careful to include a loophole—the key to breaking the law, of course, is not to be seen breaking it.

But the first challenge comes sooner than anyone expected and necessitates a much bigger loophole. Reminded the Princess of France is approaching on state business, the king proves himself a quick reviser:

King: We must of force dispense with this decree;

She must lie here on mere necessity.

Berowne: Necessity will make us all forsworn

Three thousand times within this three years' space:

For every man with his affects is born,

Not by might mastered, but by special grace.

If I break faith, this word shall speak for me:

I am forsworn "on mere necessity."

So to the laws at large I write my name . . .

[I.i.144–52]

Secure in the knowledge that he can wriggle free at any time, Berowne drops his objections and signs the proclamation.

The crisis involving the princess is only the most obvious example of the scholars' lack of foresight; no sooner has "necessity" solved one problem than another pops up. The king has apparently not considered that his less enlightened subjects might resist imposed celibacy. Thus when Constable Dull enters with news that Costard, the court fool, has been "taken with a wench" [I.i.274], the pronounced sentence is not public shaming but fasting for a week on bran and water. Perhaps the king reasons that Costard, already a fool by profession, cannot be shamed; more likely, he finds it impossible to feign anger against the clown:

King [reading Armado's letter]: "Great deputy, the welkin's vicegerent,
and sole dominator of Navarre, my soul's earth's God, and body's
fostering patron—"

Costard: Not a word of Costard yet.

King: "So it is—"

Costard: It may be so; but if he say it is so, he is, in telling true, but so.

King: Peace!

Costard: Be to me and every man that dares not fight.

King: No words!

Costard: Of other men's secrets, I beseech you.

[I.i.214–24]

The actor who plays the king here as anything but amused has totally misread the scene.

But it is the king who misreads during his next appearance, when he and the princess haggle over the rights to Aquitaine. Boyet, one of the lords attending the princess, immediately realizes what has happened—though, in keeping with the play's verbosity, he takes a while to articulate it:

Boyet: If my observation (which very seldom lies)
By the heart's still rhetoric disclosed with eyes
Deceive me not now, Navarre is infected.

Princess: With what?

Boyet: With that which we lovers entitle affected.

Princess: Your reason?

Boyet: Why, all his behaviors did make their retire
To the court of his eye, peeping thorough desire.
His heart, like an agate, with your print impressed,
Proud with his form, in his eye pride expressed.
His tongue, all impatient to speak and not see,
Did stumble with haste in his eyesight to be . . .

[II.i.227–38]

Indeed, the princess's visit reveals just how green King Ferdinand is, not only in matters of love but of basic statecraft. A stammering tongue is no excuse for the rudeness with which he greets her suit:

Madam, your father here doth intimate
The payment of a hundred thousand crowns,
Being but the one half of an entire sum
Disbursed by my father in his wars.
But say that he, or we (as neither have),
Received that sum, yet there remains unpaid
A hundred thousand more, in surety of the which,
One part of Aquitaine is bound to us,

Although not valued to the money's worth.

[II.i.128–36]

In case she missed his insults, he repeats them, with a touch of sexual harassment.

Aquitaine might not be much in his eyes, but at least the princess is attractive:

If then the king your father will restore
 But that one half which is unsatisfied,
 We will give up our right in Aquitaine, . . .
 Which we much rather had depart withal
 And have the money by our father lent,
 Than Aquitaine, so gelded as it is.
 Dear princess, were not his requests so far
 From reason's yielding, your fair self should make
 A yielding 'gainst some reason in my breast,
 And go well satisfied to France again.

[II.i.137–52]

The details of this mess are impossible to extricate from what little Shakespeare gives us, but I am inclined to believe the princess, who has trekked hundreds of miles to negotiate, more than the king, who has shut himself in an ivory tower. Suffice it to say, the princess is outraged, but when Boyet promises to deliver evidence contradicting the king's account, Ferdinand shrugs off the whole matter and exits with his friends, who one by one sneak back to mine Boyet for information concerning the particular lady with whom he has fallen in love. Dumaine and Longaville are content to learn their respective choices (Katharine and Maria) are heiresses to wealthy French lords, but Berowne and Rosaline have an actual conversation before he disappears to compose a sonnet extolling her beauty—and to bemoan his unjust plight. “By the world, I would not care a pin if the other three were in,” he finally concludes [IV.iii.16–17], and like clockwork his partners in perjury enter to read their own sonnets, bemoan their own plights, and express their own desires for shameful company.

At the same time, each reflexively castigates the others for their shared sin. King Ferdinand best articulates what drives adolescents everywhere to divert attention from their own shortcomings by mocking their peers’:

What will Berowne say when that he shall hear
 Faith so infringed, which such zeal did swear?
 How will he scorn! How will he spend his wit!
 How will he triumph, leap and laugh at it!
 For all the wealth that ever I did see,
 I would not have him know so much by me.

[IV.iii.141–6]

The possibility that Berowne might *empathize* never crosses anyone’s mind. Sure enough, Berowne plays his assigned role with gusto, scorning and laughing . . . until he is unwittingly exposed for a hypocrite by Costard and Jaquenetta. His mask ripped away, Berowne calls for a truce—“Sweet lords, sweet lovers, O, let us embrace!” [IV.iii.210]—but the pack seizes instead the opportunity for revenge. In response to Berowne’s dazzling ode to “the heaven of [Rosaline’s] brow” [IV.iii.223], the king reasserts his position as top dog: “What zeal, what fury, hath inspired thee now? / My love, her mistress, is a gracious moon, / She, an attending star, scarce seen a light” [IV.iii.225–7].

What begins as a battle of wounded egos grows increasingly nasty, as the men aim their poisoned darts not at the deserving Berowne but at his lady of choice, the dark-featured Rosaline:

Dumaine: To look like her are chimney sweepers black.
Longaville: And since her time are colliers counted bright.
King: And Ethiops of their sweet complexion crack.
Dumaine: Dark needs no candles now, for dark is light.
Berowne: Your mistresses dare never come in rain,
 For fear their colors should be washed away.
King: ’Twere good yours did, for, sir, to tell you plain,
 I’ll find a fairer face not washed today.
Berowne: I’ll prove her fair, or talk till doomsday here.
King: No devil will fright thee then so much as she.

Dumaine: I never knew man hold vile stuff so dear.

Longaville: Look, here's thy love—my foot and her face see.

[IV.iii.262–73]

Berowne's attempts to "prove her fair" prove only how much he still values worthless opinions—his friends are not pursuing Rosaline, so who cares what they think? Again Shakespeare anticipates themes he shall further develop in *Romeo and Juliet*, for in the rancid wits of Navarre we may hear Mercutio's laughter; unfortunately for Berowne, Rosaline is a far more ambivalent partner than Juliet, and he shall suffer in ways Romeo can only imagine.

For the ladies of France carry baggage of their own to Navarre, and (especially when prodded by the dreadful Boyet) are capable of equally caustic dialogue. If, unlike their male counterparts, they manage to preserve their dignity, it is arguably because none of them feels genuine love for her suitor; as the princess admits at play's end,

We have received your letters, full of love;
Your favors, the ambassadors of love;
And in our maiden council rated them
At courtship, pleasant jest, and courtesy,
As bombast and as lining to the time.
But more devout than this in our respects
Have we not been, and therefore met your loves
In their own fashion, like a merriment.

[V.ii.767–74]

Yet the ladies are clearly affected by this courtship, and none more so than Rosaline. The nature of her relationship to Berowne is one of the first great mysteries in Shakespeare, and it warrants careful attention:

Rosaline and Berowne

As Katharine has met Dumaine, and Maria Longaville, prior to reuniting in Navarre, so too has Rosaline met Berowne; in fact, her initial recollection is

unequivocally positive:

Another of these students at that time
 Was there with him, if I have heard a truth.
 Berowne they call him, but a merrier man,
 Within the limit of becoming mirth,
 I never spent an hour's talk withal.
 His eye begets occasion for his wit,
 For every object that the one doth catch
 The other turns to a mirth-moving jest,
 Which his fair tongue, conceit's expositor,
 Delivers in such apt and gracious words,
 That aged ears play truant at his tales,
 And younger hearings are quite ravished,
 So sweet and voluble is his discourse.

[II.i.64–76]

This would be easy to dismiss as poetic hyperbole (as we dismiss Katharine's and Maria's unwarranted praise for their own favorites), were it not so at odds with Rosaline's final assessment, in Act Five:

Oft have I heard of you, my Lord Berowne,
 Before I saw you, and the world's large tongue
 Proclaims you for a man replete with mocks,
 Full of comparisons and wounding flouts,
 Which you on all estates will execute
 That lie within the mercy of your wit.

[V.ii.825–30]

Indeed, she has grown so weary of his shallow wit—"wormwood" in an otherwise "fruitful brain" [V.ii.831]—she charges him with perhaps the most brilliantly sadistic task in Shakespeare:

Rosaline: You shall this twelvemonth term from day to day
 Visit the speechless sick, and still converse
 With groaning wretches; and your task shall be
 With all the fierce endeavor of your wit
 To enforce the pained impotent to smile.
Berowne: To move wild laughter in the throat of death?
 It cannot be, it is impossible:
 Mirth cannot move a soul in agony.
Rosaline: Why, that's the way to choke a gibing spirit,

Whose influence is begot of that loose grace
Which shallow laughing hearers give to fools.

[V.ii.834–44]

It is difficult to guess who shall suffer more: Berowne or the “speechless sick” upon whom penitence must be foisted. But Rosaline is merciless; we might be tempted to conclude Berowne’s juvenile antics have altered her opinion of the man. (Apparently not all women appreciate bad Russian accents and amateur theatrics.) She is contrary, however, from the overture:

Berowne: Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?

Rosaline: Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?

Berowne: I know you did.

Rosaline: How needless was it then
To ask the question!

Berowne: You must not be so quick.

Rosaline: ’Tis ’long of you that spur me with such questions.

Berowne: Your wit’s too hot, it speeds too fast, ’twill tire.

Rosaline: Not till it leave the rider in the mire.

Berowne: What time o’ day?

Rosaline: The hour that fools should ask.

Berowne: Now fair befall your mask!

Rosaline: Fair fall the face it covers!

Berowne: And send you many lovers!

Rosaline: Amen, so you be none.

Berowne: Nay, then will I be gone.

[II.i.114–27]

Rosaline might not be alone in finding Berowne’s technique, with its feigned nonchalance, too glib to be charming. Nevertheless—if only for the memory of Brabant—Berowne might have expected a warmer reception; he is understandably frustrated to be dismissed before he can even announce himself. Yet if Rosaline’s intent is to forestall romance, she’d have had more luck as a flirt. Instead, in her provoking eyes, which “sparkle still the right Promethean fire” [IV.iii.325], Berowne recognizes himself, and he—who has been “love’s whip, / A very beadle to a humorous sigh, / A

critic, nay, a night-watch constable, / A domineering pedant o'er the boy, / . . . This signor-junior, giant-dwarf, Dan Cupid" [III.i.171–7]—learns that even his masterful wit can be mastered.

One of the least appealing traits of the four men, and of Berowne in particular, is their eagerness to blame their pitiful state on the women, who apparently should have realized the trouble they'd cause by visiting. "Rebuke me not for that which you provoke, / The virtue of your eye must break my oath," King Ferdinand admonishes the princess [V.ii.348–9], and Berowne is equally beside the point when he argues, "Those heavenly eyes that look into these faults / Suggested us to make" [V.ii.759–60]. Yet the women cannot deny the pleasure they take—and the lavish gifts—in stringing along their hapless suitors. "We are wise girls to mock our lovers so," pronounces the princess, to which Rosaline replies, quite reasonably, "They are worse fools to purchase mocking so" [V.ii.58–9]. She cannot check herself, however, and the ensuing lines are perhaps the most revealing in the play (though what exactly they reveal is debatable):

That same Berowne I'll torture ere I go.
 O that I knew he were but in by th' week!
 How I would make him fawn, and beg, and seek,
 And wait the season, and observe the times,
 And spend his prodigal wits in bootless rhymes,
 And shape his service wholly to my hests,
 And make him proud to make me proud that jests!
 So pertaunt-like would I o'ersway his state
 That he should be my fool, and I his fate.

[V.ii.60–8]

These are the words of a woman scorned. Berowne wishes to present himself as a Prometheus, heroically braving the fires that flash in Rosaline's wondrous eyes; she recasts herself as an avenging Fury, and the simplest interpretation is that she is avenging his crime against her. The play's backstory is murky, but has Berowne—to borrow, from

the forthcoming *Much Ado About Nothing* [II.i.265], Beatrice’s tantalizing hint about her past with Benedick—won Rosaline’s heart “with false dice”? Perhaps “Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?” is not merely rhetorical—whatever may have passed that night between Rosaline and Berowne, it seems to have stayed with her longer and meant more. Assuming they once shared a romance, however brief, his reducing it to an uncertain spin around the dance floor is more than she can forgive—in an instant she flings off her rose-colored glasses and vows to bring him to his knees.

In *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, where even friends feed on each other, the greater danger is not rejection but vulnerability. Though better at maintaining the veneer of civility, the women no less than the men are bonded by mutual insecurity:

Katharine: . . . Had she been light, like you,
Of such a merry, nimble, stirring spirit,
She might ha’ been a grandam ere she died,
And so may you, for a light heart lives long.
Rosaline: What’s your dark meaning, mouse, of this light word?
Katharine: A light condition in a beauty dark.
Rosaline: We need more light to find your meaning out.
Katharine: You’ll mar the light by taking it in snuff;
Therefore, I’ll darkly end the argument.
Rosaline: Look, what you do, you do it still i’ th’ dark.
Katharine: So do not you, for you are a light wench.
Rosaline: Indeed I weigh not you, and therefore light.
Katharine: You weigh me not? O, that’s you care not for me.
Rosaline: Great reason, for past cure is still past care.

[V.ii.15–28]

Unfortunately, civility is no match for Boyet and Costard, who spur the women to ever more vulgar depths; even for audiences unfamiliar with archery and lawn bowling, the puns cannot fully mask the pornographic imagery:

Rosaline: “Thou canst not hit it, hit it, hit it,
Thou canst not hit it, my good man.”
Boyet: “An I cannot, cannot, cannot,
An I cannot, another can.”

Costard: By my troth, most pleasant, how both did fit it!
Maria: A mark marvelous well shot, for they both did hit it.
Boyet: A mark! (O mark but that mark!) A mark, says my lady!
 Let the mark have a prick in't to mete at if it may be.
Maria: Wide o' the bow hand! I' faith your hand is out.
Costard: Indeed a must shoot nearer, or he'll ne'er hit the clout.
Boyet: An if my hand be out, then belike your hand is in.
Costard: Then will she get the upshoot by cleaving the pin.
Maria: Come, come, you talk greasily; your lips grow foul.
Costard: She's too hard for you at pricks. Sir, challenge her to bowl.
Boyet: I fear too much rubbing. Good night, my good owl.

[IV.i.126–40]

Lines such as these reveal a conception of sex as dirty, “greasy,” shameful—of man’s nobler nature at war with “the huge army of the world’s desires” [I.i.10]. Until this revulsion from the physical is overcome—until people can talk openly of desire—romantic love is doomed to fail, and irony becomes a screen for hiding behind: Reveal too much, and protest your partner misconstrued your meaning.

Berowne is particularly torn as he struggles to separate his ideals from the reality that confronts him in the person of Rosaline. His favorite argument against the Navarrese Academy is that love is superior to knowledge (indeed, he claims love is the source of knowledge); yet his words cannot possibly describe a woman of flesh and blood:

Light seeking light doth light of light beguile;
 So, ere you find where light in darkness lies,
 Your light grows dark by losing of your eyes.
 Study me how to please the eye indeed,
 By fixing it upon a fairer eye,
 Who dazzling so, that eye shall be his heed,
 And give him light that it was blinded by.

[I.i.77–83]

These lines are merely a warm-up for what is to come, a beautifully crafted ode to his own potency, one organ at a time:

O, we have made a vow to study, lords,
 And in that vow we have forsworn our books;

For when would you, my liege, or you, or you,
 In leaden contemplation have found out
 Such fiery numbers as the prompting eyes
 Of beauty's tutors have enriched you with?
 Other slow arts entirely keep the brain,
 And therefore, finding barren practicers,
 Scarce show a harvest of their heavy toil;
 But love, first learned in a lady's eyes,
 Lives not alone immured in the brain,
 But, with the motion of all elements,
 Courses as swift as thought in every power,
 And gives to every power a double power,
 Above their functions and their offices.
 It adds a precious seeing to the eye:
 A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind.
 A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound,
 When the suspicious head of theft is stopped.
 Love's feeling is more soft and sensible
 Than are the tender horns of cockled snails.
 Love's tongue proves dainty Bacchus gross in taste.
 For valor, is not Love a Hercules,
 Still climbing trees in the Hesperides?
 Subtle as Sphinx, as sweet and musical
 As bright Apollo's lute, strung with his hair.
 And when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods
 Make heaven drowsy with the harmony.

[IV.iii.292–319]

Berowne's elegant theories collapse before Rosaline, who becomes in his eyes the antithesis of all he thinks he knows. Is there a more horrifying portrait of desire than what he contemplates in soliloquy?

What? I love, I sue, I seek a wife!
 A woman that is like a German clock,
 Still a-repairing, ever out of frame,
 And never going aright, being a watch,
 But being watched that it may still go right!
 Nay, to be perjured, which is worst of all,
 And, among three, to love the worst of all,
 A whitely wanton with a velvet brow,
 With two pitch balls stuck in her face for eyes.
 Ay, and, by heaven, one that will do the deed,
 Though Argus were her eunuch and her guard.

[III.i.186–96]

This revisionary vision so shakes Berowne, he ends the play convinced that love—though still “[f]ormed by the eye and therefore, like the eye”—is “[f]ull of straying shapes, of habits and of forms, / Varying in subjects as the eye doth roll / To every varied object in his glance” [V.ii.752–5]. In other words, don’t expect me to remain faithful when women are constantly crossing my field of vision.

But to return to that Act Three soliloquy, in which Berowne obsesses over Rosaline’s readiness to “do the deed”: Again, might Shakespeare be offering us a glimpse into the backstory? What reason (besides misogyny) does Berowne have for slandering a woman who, at least when we see her, is anything but yielding. (Admittedly, Katharine too accuses Rosaline of having “a light condition” [V.ii.20], though Rosaline fires back a similar charge.) Did an overhasty beginning in Brabant sputter out into a one-night stand? Berowne would not be the first person to regret—even repress—the morning after. (See Sonnet 129: “The expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action . . .”)

Granted, I am venturing well beyond the text here. My point is simply that imaginative actors, if they wish, may extrapolate from Shakespeare’s hints a richly detailed history for Rosaline and Berowne. Or they may shave off the loose ends and play up the wit. For wit abounds in this lively comedy, and not only the brand dispensed by sophisticated lovers. *Love’s Labor’s Lost* features a whole other set of characters, funnier than the first, really (though much of their humor is unintentional), and it is to them now I turn:

The Pageant of the Worthies

Though much could be said about Holofernes the pedant, Sir Nathaniel the curate, Moth, Costard, and the gloriously trivial Don Adriano de Armado, I shall limit myself to

their roles as touchstones, against which their supposed betters may be tested. As Costard quips to Jaquenetta, when the king and his lords are unmasked as hypocrites, “Walk aside the true folk, and let the traitors stay” [IV.iii.209]. I don’t want to overemphasize this aspect of their character, for these are not “wise fools” in the mold of *Twelfth Night*’s Feste. Armado in particular is rendered absurd even before his first entrance—his letter to the king spells out his extravagance in precise detail:

So it is, besieged with sable-colored melancholy, I did commend the black-oppressing humor to the most wholesome physic of thy health-giving air; and, as I am a gentleman, betook myself to walk. The time when? About the sixth hour, when beasts most graze, birds best peck, and men sit down to that nourishment which is called supper: so much for the time when.

[I.i.225–31]

To our great delight, words like “so much for” mean very little to Armado, who likewise informs us of the ground, place, and position of his perambulation before arriving at the start of his point.

If the Spanish Armado suggests a man newly intoxicated with the English language, the very English Holofernes and Sir Nathaniel are nursing hangovers. Their (futile) attempts to impose Latin terms on their rapidly evolving native tongue are predictably ridiculous:

Nathaniel: I did converse this *quondam* day with a companion of the king’s, who is intituled, nominated, or called, Don Adriano de Armado.

Holofernes: *Novi hominum tanquam te*. . . . He draweth out the thread of his verbosity finer than the staple of his argument. I abhor such fanatical phantasims, such insociable and point-devise companions, such rackers of orthography as to speak “dout” *sine* “b” when he should say “doubt”; “det” when he should pronounce “debt”—d, e, b, t, not d, e, t. He clepeth a calf “cauf”; half “hauf”; neighbor *vocatur* “nebor,” neigh abbreviated “ne.” This is abominable, which he would call “abominable.” It insinuateth me of *insanire*. *Ne intelligis, domine?* To make frantic, lunatic.

Nathaniel: Laus Deo bone intelligo.

Holofernes: Bone? Bone for bene! Priscian a little scratched—'twill serve.
[V.i.6–28]

Costard and Moth, Armado's diminutive page, are far less zany; they spend much of their time onstage lobbing insults caught only by the audience. Yet these fantastical lovers of language acquire unusual dignity in Act Five, when the play's other lovers decide to woo their chosen ladies with a play. For reasons that could not possibly make sense, this delicate task is entrusted to Armado, who promptly enlists the help of Holofernes and Sir Nathaniel (who have inexplicably acquired reputations for being "good at such eruptions and sudden breaking-out of mirth, as it were" [V.i.106–7]). Pedant that he is, Holofernes decides to present a pageant of the Nine Worthies, legendary heroes of the classical, Hebrew, and medieval Christian eras.

The pageant follows an ill-conceived masque, in which the lords pose as Muscovites and even the quick-witted Moth (forced to recite a prologue) is flustered by the ladies' constant mocks. Reentering in their own costumes, the gentlemen vent their spleen at Boyet, who, they have rightly guessed, had forewarned the women of their purpose. Gripes Berowne:

This fellow pecks up wit, as pigeons peas,
And utters it again when God doth please.
He is wit's peddler, and retails his wares
At wakes and wassails, meetings, markets, fairs;
And we that sell by gross, the Lord doth know,
Have not the grace to grace it with such show.

[V.ii.316–21]

Later, following fresh humiliation, Berowne again finds in Boyet a convenient scapegoat:

Some carrytale, some pleaseman, some slight zany,
Some mumblenews, some trencher knight, some Dick
That smiles his cheek in years, and knows the trick
To make my lady laugh when she's disposed,

Told our intents before . . .
 You put our page out. Go, you are allowed.
 Die when you will, a smock shall be your shroud.
 You leer upon me, do you? There's an eye
 Wounds like a leaden sword.

[V.ii.464–82]

Boyet's position of favor exacerbates Berowne's disdain. "The ladies call him sweet," he sulks. "The stairs, as he treads on them, kiss his feet" [V.ii.330–1]. Yet he shall eagerly team up with Boyet against lower targets, and it is here that Armado and the other clowns reenter.

The king at least tries to cancel the pageant, but Berowne and the princess overrule him. Their respective arguments for what everyone knows will be a disaster reinforce the gap in maturity separating the women from the men:

King: Berowne, they will shame us. Let them not approach.
Berowne: We are shame-proof, my lord, and 'tis some policy
 To have one show worse than the king's and his company.
King: I say they shall not come.
Princess: Nay, my good lord, let me o'errule you now.
 That sport best pleases that doth least know how,
 Where zeal strives to content, and the contents
 Dies in the zeal of that which it presents.
 Their form confounded makes most form in mirth
 When great things laboring perish in their birth.
Berowne: A right description of our sport, my lord.

[V.ii.509–19]

What Berowne fails to realize—*will not* realize—is that a world of difference separates the clowns, who strive wholeheartedly to please others, from the lords, who please only themselves. Always placing himself at an ironic distance is precisely what makes Berowne unlovable—he is endlessly amusing, but we do not love him as we do Armado, who is incapable of irony and thus fully open to affection. The ladies *are* beginning to realize this, however, and so despite having mercilessly mocked their inept

woosers, they sit respectfully through one of the greatest travesties Shakespeare penned. Meanwhile the men blunder about, destroying whatever goodwill we might once have felt toward them.

The pageant begins with Costard—to no one’s surprise, Boyet is the first to heckle—but in spite of Berowne’s claim, Costard is the only person onstage truly “shame-proof”; he laughs off interruptions with the flair of a professional fool. Sir Nathaniel fares worse, as the lords begin to forsake wit for potshots:

Nathaniel: When in the world I lived, I was the world’s commander;
By east, west, north, and south, I spread my conquering might;
My scutcheon plain declares that I am Alisander—

Boyet: Your nose says, no, you are not; for it stands too right.

Berowne: Your nose smells “no” in this, most tender-smelling knight.

Princess: The conqueror is dismayed. Proceed, good Alexander.

Nathaniel: When in the world I lived, I was the world’s commander—

Boyet: Most true, ’tis right—you were so, Alisander.

Berowne: Pompey the Great—

Costard: Your servant, and Costard.

Berowne: Take away the conqueror, take away Alisander.

Costard: O, sir, you have overthrown Alisander the conqueror! You will be scraped out of the painted cloth for this. . . . There, an’t shall please you, a foolish mild man, an honest man, look you, and soon dashed. He is a marvelous good neighbor, faith, and a very good bowler, but for Alisander—alas, you see how ’tis—a little o’erparted.

[V.ii.557–79]

Costard injects much-needed humor—he cannot hide his affection for the silly old curate. But worse is to come. Holofernes barely makes it through one line of his speech; the lords—increasingly oblivious to the ladies’ presence—refuse even to limit their scornful commentary to the quality of the performance:

Holofernes: I will not be put out of countenance.

Berowne: Because thou hast no face.

Holofernes: What is this?

Boyet: A citternhead.

Dumaine: The head of a bodkin.

Berowne: A death's face in a ring.

Longaville: The face of an old Roman coin, scarce seen.

Boyet: The pommel of Caesar's falchion.

Dumaine: The carved-bone face on a flask.

Berowne: Saint George's half-cheek in a brooch.

Dumaine: Ay, and in a brooch of lead.

Berowne: Ay, and worn in the cap of a toothdrawer.

And now forward, for we have put thee in countenance.

[V.ii.601–13]

Granted, what the king and his friends have endured to this point has been devastating (though Boyet has no such excuse)—in the span of a day or two their identities, once so certain, have been shredded. The academy of Navarre provides no guidelines for the transition to manhood, and we may understand the impulse to clutch at remnants of wittier selves, before love revealed the full scope of the lords' inadequacies. But men cannot be boys again, and so when Holofernes straightens his back and replies, with all the authority he can muster, "This is not generous, not gentle, not humble" [V.ii.622], his words, for once, are apt. Men—especially those born into privilege and power—should hold themselves to higher standards.

Of course they are deaf to rebukes, and so Armado, the final Worthy, enters in the guise of Hector, prince of Troy. The Don has never been more unwittingly charming; who can doubt the sincerity of the princess's request: "Speak, brave Hector, we are much delighted" [V.ii.658]? The men clearly feel otherwise, but no matter—Armado can no more sense malice in others than he can express it himself. His final epiphany captures in three brief sentences everything his mockers still have to learn about generosity of spirit:

Armado: The armipotent Mars, of lances the almighty,

Gave Hector a gift—

Dumaine: A gilt nutmeg.

Berowne: A lemon.

Longaville: Stuck with cloves.

Dumaine: No, cloven.

Armado: Peace!

The armipotent Mars, of lances the almighty,
Gave Hector a gift, the heir of Ilion;
A man so breathed that certain he would fight, yea
From morn till night, out of his pavilion.
I am that flower—

Dumaine: That mint.

Longaville: That columbine.

Armado: Sweet Lord Longaville, rein thy tongue.

Longaville: I must rather give it the rein, for it runs against Hector.

Dumaine: Ay, and Hector's a greyhound.

Armado: The sweet warman is dead and rotten. Sweet chucks, beat not
the bones of the buried. When he breathed, he was a man.

[V.ii.637–55]

Unfortunately, Shakespeare cannot leave us with this image of Armado, who becomes instead the butt of one last joke. Convinced he is responsible for Jaquenetta's sudden pregnancy, Armado pledges to toil three years to win her love, though the shifty Costard is probably the true father. Apparently Shakespeare could not wholly transcend his immature protagonists. Only Death—in the person of Marcadé, who arrives to announce the passing of the King of France—is all powerful in Navarre, and death makes possible the play's magnificent ending:

Love's Labor's Lost

Unless we count *Troilus and Cressida*, *Love's Labor's Lost* is the only Shakespearean comedy that ends neither in marriage nor impending marriage. Clearly the women have reason to doubt their suitors; they therefore impose the following condition: Live virtuously and chastely, and if in one year you still wish to marry, you shall find us willing. The men all pledge to submit . . . but can we believe them?

Shakespeare's title offers a clue, as does Berowne's response to the unanticipated turn of events:

Berowne: Our wooing doth not end like an old play:

Jack hath not Jill. These ladies' courtesy
 Might well have made our sport a comedy.
King: Come, sir, it wants a twelvemonth and a day,
 And then 'twill end.
Berowne: That's too long for a play.

[V.ii.858–62]

Even here, in his final lines, Berowne shifts the blame for his failure—we're not getting married because *these ladies* lack courtesy. He has not changed. Nor, I think, has Rosaline, whose demand—unique amongst the women—that her man “choke [his] gibing spirit” by entertaining “groaning wretches” suggests she has grown, if anything, *more* hostile in his presence.

Berowne undermines his cause in countless ways, both outrageous—as during the Pageant of the Worthies—and subtle. His declaration to forsake ostentatious displays—“Henceforth my wooing mind shall be expressed / In russet yeas and honest kersey noes”—comes in perfect sonnet form [V.ii.403–16], and though he laughs off this particular “trick / Of the old rage” [V.ii.417–8], the habit proves tough to break. “Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief,” he tells the princess, after learning of her father's death, only to launch into a 24-line speech [V.ii.743–66] that fails to acknowledge—let alone console—her grief; it does, however, make liberal use of Berowne's favorite conceit, the relationship between love and women's eyes.

As for the other lovers, does anyone care what happens between Dumaine and Katharine or Longaville and Maria? (I'm not even sure these pairings are correct—is it Dumaine and Maria, Katharine and Longaville?) The king and the princess, now France's queen, are more interesting, though I do not hear in his desperate plea, “Now, at the latest minute of the hour, / Grant us your loves,” much indication that he appreciates—to use her fine phrase—the “world-without-end bargain” that is marriage [V.ii.777–9].

Love's Labor's Lost ends with a marvelous song contrasting “Hiems, Winter” and “Ver, the Spring” [V.ii.874]. Spring, for all its beauty, is a time of idle romance, governed by the cuckoo, emblem of unfaithfulness; familial bonds are forged in winter, as bulwarks against the season’s harshness. To the play’s characters, the song offers little encouragement—is the only alternative to a lovesick youth a passionless old age? Where is the time for love that is both physical and faithful? Shakespeare has given such questions scant attention till now (assuming *Love's Labor's Lost* is the fourth of his romantic comedies): *The Comedy of Errors* contains only the bare outlines of love stories, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is incoherent; *The Taming of the Shrew* features the indelible Kate and Petruchio, but their relationship must remain a mystery.

Love's Labor's Lost thus seems to mark a transition in Shakespeare’s representation of romantic love—always uneasy with the preordained happy ending of comedy, he rejects it here. Yet he must also have recognized the unsustainability of this solution. And so he began turning to lovers who can learn from each other what it means to love and be loved: from Romeo and Juliet to Portia and Bassanio, then a great leap to Beatrice and Benedick and another to Rosalind and Orlando, who more than any two people in Shakespeare grow to be truly worthy of each other. Rosaline and Berowne can scarcely dream of such growth, though its seeds lie in their frustrated coupling, and its glory owes them a debt.

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