Love’s Labour’s Lost

Introduction

This LibGuide was created to accompany the Visions & Voices event: Love's Labour's Lost. On Saturday, November 21, USC students will have a chance to attend Shakespeare's Globe Theater's performance of Love's Labour's Lost.

Shakespeare’s celebration of young love is a festive parade of every weapon in the youthful playwright's comic arsenal—from excruciating cross-purposes to silly impersonations, drunkenness, bust-ups and pratfalls. It’s also his most joyful banquet of language, groaning with puns, rhymes, bizarre syntax, grotesque coinages and parody. Read more about the event at the Visions & Voices website.

About the play: "A splendid satire, with some of Shakespeare's best early poetry with masterly scenes and excellent characterizations. The play tells how the King of Navarre and three of his lords vow to spend three years in study and not see any women. But when the Princess of France arrives on a diplomatic mission with her three ladies, the men fall in love with them. At the news comes of the death of the King of France and the ladies depart, refusing to marry until their suitors undergo a year's probation, hence the play's title."

William Shakespeare

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Love's Labour's Lost

Plot Synopsis

Introduction

Sources

The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare online

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Love's Labour's Lost At once Shakespeare's most airy comedy and his most sustained discussion of language, Love's Labour's Lost was probably composed in 1594 and 1595. It is listed among Shakespeare's works by Meres in 1598, and appeared in the same year in a quarto edition which boasts that the play was acted before Queen Elizabeth 'this last Christmas' (which may mean either 1597 – 8 or 1596 – 7). The play's heavy use of rhyme suggests it belongs to the 'lyrical' period initiated by Venus and Adonia (1592 – 3): in rare vocabulary it is closely linked to Romeo and Juliet (1595) and A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595), but stylistically it seems to be earlier. Probable allusions in Act 5 to the Christmas revels at Gray's Inn in 1594 suggest that the play was composed, or at least completed, early in 1595.

Text

The surviving 1598 quarto of the play claims to be 'Newly corrected and augmented', but in all probability this is an exaggeration and the edition is merely a reprint of a now lost earlier edition of the same year. The text seems to have been set, fairly carelessly to judge by several passages which seem to preserve two successive drafts of the same speech (in 4.3), from Shakespeare's own foul papers. The play was reprinted in the Folio in 1623, directly from the quarto text, but with some corrections made apparently from a promptbook.

Sources

No specific source is known for the play's plot, although it clearly alludes to the historical French court: King Henri of Navarre did have two lords called the Marechal de Biron and the Duc de Longueville, who served as commanders in the French civil war from 1589 to 1592. Biron was widely known in England, since he became an associate and adviser of the Earl of Essex when he led an English force to Henry's aid. It has been conjectured that the main story of Love's Labour's Lost may derive from a now-lost account of a diplomatic visit to Henry in 1578 made by Catherine de Médicis and her daughter Marguerite de Valois, Henry's estranged wife, to discuss the future of Aquitaine, but this is by no means certain. What is much clearer is that the play's sub-plot is peopled by Shakespeare's variants on familiar comic types from Italian commedia dell'arte, which abounds in pedants (like Holofernes), braggarts (like Don Armado), rustic priests (like Sir Nathaniel), rural clowns (like Costard), and pert pages (like Mote).

Synopsis

1.1 Ferdinand, the King of Navarre, has three of his lords, Biron, Longueville, and Dumaine, sign a declaration vowing that they will study with him for three years, not seeing a woman throughout that time: Biron is sceptical about the scheme, but eventually signs anyway. The rustic constable Dull, on the instructions of the Spaniard Don Armado (from whom he brings an affected letter), brings the country swain Costard to the King; Costard is condemned to a week's fasting for having been caught in the royal purloins with the wench Jaquenetta.

1.2 Armado confesses to his punning page Mote that he is in love with Jaquenetta. Dull brings Costard with the King's instruction that Armado guard him and make him fast for a week. Armado undertakes to write poetry about his love.

2.1 The Princess of France arrives on an embassy to Navarre from her father, accompanied by three ladies, Maria, Catherine, and Rosaline, and three lords, one named Boyet: having heard of the King's vow she sends Boyet ahead to him, and while he is away the three respective ladies discuss the King's three respective fellow students. When the King and his three colleagues arrive the Princess presents him with a letter from her father, demanding back a share of Aquitaine in recompense for the full repayment of a loan: while the King reads it Biron is witty rebuffed by Rosaline, with whom he attempts to flirt. The King agrees to accommodate the Princess while they await the arrival of documents which will establish whether or not the whole loan has already been repaid. Each of his lords privately asks Boyet the name of one of her ladies: Dumaine is attracted to Catherine, Longueville to Maria, and Biron to Rosaline, while Boyet tells the Princess he thinks the King himself is falling in love with her.

3.1 Armado sends Mote to fetch Costard, with whom he means to entrust a love letter to Jaquenetta. Costard, after a bantering quarrel with Mote about hurting his shin, is left with three farthings for delivering the letter. Biron arrives and gives Costard a shilling to deliver a letter to Rosaline; left alone, he reflects on the demeaning absurdity of his having fallen in love with her.
4.1 The Princess, out hunting with her ladies, meets Costard, who does not know which of them is Rosaline: he gives the Princess Armado's letter by mistake, which Boyet reads aloud to general amusement. Costard jests with Boyet and the ladies.

4.2 The schoolmaster Holofernes and the priest Nathaniel are being learnedly witty at the expense of Dull, and Holofernes is showing off his pedantry to Nathaniel, when the illiterate Jaquenetta and Costard arrive to ask Nathaniel to read them the letter Jaquenetta has received from Armado: unfortunately Costard has given her Biron's letter to Rosaline, which Holofernes tells her to take to the King.

4.3 Biron has been writing more poetry for Rosaline: hiding, he overhears the King reading aloud his own poem to the Princess. The King in turn hides when he sees Longueville approach, and both he and Biron overhear Longueville reading out a poem he has composed for Maria. Longueville then hides, and all overhear Dumaine sighing in rhyme for Catherine. Longueville steps forward and reproaches Dumaine: the King steps forward and reproaches Longueville for hypocrisy: then Biron steps forward and reproaches all of them. His triumph is short-lived, however, as Jaquenetta and Costard arrive with his own letter to Rosaline, which he at first tears up but then confesses to. Biron urges his colleagues to lay aside their unnatural vow and set about their wooing.

5.1 Nathaniel and Holofernes, discussing Armado's pretensions to linguistic style before a silent and uncomprehending Dull, are interrupted by Armado's arrival, with Costard and Mote: he has been sent confidentially by the King to commission an entertainment to be performed for the Princess. Holofernes decides they shall stage a pageant of the Nine Worthies.

5.2 The Princess and her ladies scoff at the respective love letters they have received. Boyet brings news that the King and his three lords are arriving, disguised as Muscovites: the women exchange masks, so as to trick their suitors into wooing the wrong people. The men arrive, posing as Muscovites, prefaced by a speech from Mote which, despite prompting, he forgets: all four are taken in by the trick and each is dashed by the witty rebuffs of his partner before they leave, discomfited. The women scoff behind their backs, and when they return undisguised they pretend not to have recognized them, lamenting that they have had their time wasted by foolish Russians. Biron forswears all affectation and pretence to wit in his future wooing, and finally understands how he and his companions have been ridiculed. Costard arrives to ask whether the Nine Worthies should perform, and despite the King's misgivings the Princess insists the pageant insists the pageant should proceed. Mocked by their spectators, speaking in archaic verse, Costard impersonates Pompey the Great, Nathaniel (who forgets his words) plays Alexander the Great, Mote plays the infant Hercules strangling snakes in his cradle, but Holofernes' performance as Judas Maccabaeus is dashed by heckling. Armado appears as Hector, and is even more dashed by Costard's publicccb. The quest for topical or allegorical significance in the play has been pursued more recently by Elizabeth Vernon (according to Hugo, the original for Biron, as well as for the "Fair Youth" of the Sonnets) with Elizabeth Vernon. (The quest for topical or allegorical significance in the play has been pursued more recently by Frances Yates and her followers). The play only came into its own critically with the dawning of the aesthetic movement at the end of the century, when commentators such as Walter Pater and Algernon Charles Swinburne began to celebrate the play's studied artifice and pose of insubstantiality instead of lamenting it. Since then critics have, however, looked for sterner things in the play, whether its questioning of the limitations of comedy (notably by the bereavement which cuts off its marital ending), its alleged attempt to.at their own game, its views of language, identity and social hierarchy, or its understanding of the pastoral and the festive.

Artistic features
The play is marked by long passages of sustained punning, and by a heavy use of rhyme: even when not reading aloud from love letters, the aristocratic characters frequently speak in sonnets.

Critical history
Until the 19th century very few critics found a good word to say about Love's Labour's Lost, which seemed to most commentators to represent Shakespeare simultaneously at his most self-indulgent and his most datted Elizabethan. Francis Gentleman, relating the play to the eighth volume of Bell's edition in 1774, called it "one of Shakespeare's weakest compositions...", he certainly wrote more to please himself, than to divert or inform his readers or auditors. Enthusiasm grew over the following century, albeit often of a qualified sort. Hazlitt, though admitting it had charm, found it pedantic, while Coleridge enjoyed the play primarily as an intelligent game at the expense of the ideals of Renaissance humanism. Victor Hugo initiated one enduring strand in the play's critical history in the preface to his translation of the play, when he attempted to show that it was a specific satire on Elizabeth's court, directly inspired by the relationship between the Earl of Southampton (according to Hugo, the original for Biron, as well as for the "Fair Youth" of the Sonnets) with Elizabeth Vernon. (The quest for topical or allegorical significance in the play has been pursued more recently by Frances Yates and her followers). The play only came into its own critically with the dawning of the aesthetic movement at the end of the century, when commentators such as Walter Pater and Algernon Charles Swinburne began to celebrate the play's studied artifice and pose of insubstantiality instead of lamenting it. Since then critics have, however, looked for sterner things in the play, whether its questioning of the limitations of comedy (notably by the bereavement which cuts off its marital ending), its alleged attempt to beat the University Wits at its own game, its views of language, identity and social hierarchy, or its understanding of the pastoral and the festive.

Stage history
The courtly tone of the play, together with its comparative brevity, has led some to speculate that it may have been written for performance at an annual revel of one of the Inns of Court, but there is no direct evidence for this beyond the possibility that the missing Love's Labour's Won was a sequel, played the following year and depicting the renewal of the courtships postponed for a year at the end of this play. The play was certainly acted before Elizabeth (see above), and a private performance took place at Southampton's house over Christmas 1604 - 5, according to a letter from Sir Walter Cope. After this, though, the play disappeared from the stage, regarded as the least miscalculable of all Shakespeare's comedies (though the transplanted concluding song for many years adorning revivals of As You Like It: an anonymous adaptation published in 1762, The Students, was never performed, and when Love's Labour's Lost was finally staged by Elizabeth Vestris at Covent Garden in 1839 it enjoyed the distinction of being the last play in the canon to have been revived. Vestris was highly praised as Rosaline, but the play was not revived again until it flopped in 1857 , with Samuel Phelps as Armado. (During the 19th century, however, an adaptation of the play in French sometimes served as a replacement libretto for Mozart's Cosi fan tutte, regarded at the time as immortal.) Love's Labour's Lost was chosen (partly for its obscurity) to be acted on Shakespeare's birthday at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford in 1885, but sporadic revivals there and elsewhere (including a musical version in 1919 ) failed to establish it in the repertory. The young Tyrone Guthrie

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produced it twice, first at the Westminster theatre in 1932 and then four years later at the **Old Vic** (with **Michael Redgrave** as the King), but neither production was a hit, though the play did become something of a favourite at the **Open Air Theatre** in Regents Park in the mid-1930s. The first production really to establish the play was **Peter Brook’s** delicate, bitter-sweet revival at Stratford in 1946, with **Paul Scofield** as a melancholy Armado and designs suggestive of the paintings of Watteau. Since then it has been revived much more frequently: notable RSC productions, for example, have included **John Barton’s**, set in a wooded Elizabethan park, in 1977 – 8 (with **Michael Pennington** as Biron and Jane Lapotaire as Rosaline), Barry Kyle’s in 1984 (with Josette Simon as Rosaline) and Ian Judge’s in 1994 – 5, set in a **Zuleika Dobson**-esque Edwardian Oxford on the eve of the First World War.

Michael Dobson

**On the screen**
The earliest of five silent films was made in 1912, unsuited as the medium seems to such a word-oriented play. The Bristol Old Vic production (1964) was recorded on television to mark the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth. Elijah Moshinsky directed the BBC TV production in an 18th-century setting (1984). **Kenneth Branagh’s** version, heavily cut and featuring song-and-dance routines to music by **Cole Porter** and others, which appeared in 2000, has so far been the least critically acclaimed of his films.

Anthony Davies

**Recent major editions**

**Some representative criticism**
Barber, C. L., *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy* (1959)


**The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare online**

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