

Love's Labor's Lost Mid 1590's Shakespeare

OVERVIEW

History. *Love's Labor's Lost* is one of Shakespeare's early comedies, commonly thought to date from the mid 1590's. It was written for a performance before the Queen, and first staged at the Inns of Court. It is believed that most of Shakespeare's audience was from the beginning familiar with the historical events surrounding the King of Navarre, but that, with the passage of time, events several decades in the past began to lose their imaginative force, and audiences began losing their earlier fascination with present play.

Problems. The decline in interest clearly has other sources, in addition to the problem of historical currency. (As we know from revivals of ancient Greek tragedy, there are constant ups and downs of modern audiences' involvement with these themes.) There are inherent problems with the present play, from the audience standpoint. *Love's Labor's Lost* is replete with wordplay, subtle hairsplittings that make the thought processes of a Beatrice, in *Much Ado about Nothing*, look cloddish, and, within that wordplay, with a rich variety of classical allusions, snippets of Latin citation, and verbal horseplay centering around classical puns. For all this, however, the play has enjoyed revivals—in the last century and a half—including fresh performances by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theater, as well as adaptation for radio and television, and as a successful musical.

CHARACTERS

King of Navarre The king is the initiator of the male pact for chastity, learning, and discussion. He is righteous in his strict oversight of the others' behaviors, until, through the crazy letter mix-ups, that bedevil the main plot, he is found by his fellows to have fallen in love with the Princess, and to be no better than the rest of them.

Princess of France The princess, on mission from her father the King of France, is deputed to arrange the acquisition of the province of Navarre. Witty from the start, rarely tricked into straight statement, she meets the King distich by distich, second to no man in laying biting words on the table.

Berowne The most liberal in his interpretation of the cultural community he is entering into with the King of Navarre. While on board with the semi-monastic initial ideals of the group, Berowne is first to remind himself and others of the weakness of men, and of the absurdity of over commitment.

Don Armado The daffy Spanish nobleman adds fresh spice to the skirt chasing team of Navarre and company. His pursuit of the dairymaid Jaquenetta is tireless...and ultimately productive.

STORY

Monastics. The story foremost concerns a decision by the King of Navarre, and three of his noble companions—Berowne, Dumaine, and Longeville—to take three years off from women, and the life of pleasure, and to devote that time to study and reflection. (One thinks immediately of the model of a Prospero, the deposed scholar-ruler in *The Tempest*, or for that matter of fantasies of scholarly communities in Montaigne and Rabelais, or even of Aristophanes' over the top mockery of Socrates and Cloud Cuckoo Land in *The Birds*.) Although Berowne is somewhat reluctant, and skeptical concerning the group's will power, the men agree on their plan and determine they will not allow women closer than a mile from their court, during the three year period.

Letters. At this point a sub theme infiltrates: the arrival at court of the buffoonish Spanish nobleman, Don Armado. The Don reports that he has incriminating evidence, against the local rustic, Costard,, and a milkmaid named Jaquenetta. Costard has written romantic letters to the lady, and violated the spirit of chastity which is expected to dominate the courts. The King sentences Costard appropriately, while at that point the Spanish don lets on that he too is in love with Jaquenetta. He asks Costard to write a letter on his, the Don's, behalf, and to address it to Jaquenetta. His page, Moth, accepts the delivery assignment.

Princess. At this point the Princess of France, with her ladies, arrives, requesting an audience with the King of Navarre, concerning the acquisition of the province of Aquitaine, by France. In visiting the camp of the ladies, who have been set up a mile away from the court, conversations ensue, and the King finds himself falling in love with the Princess. The three accompanying lords fall in love too, and the group ethos seems to be splitting. Berowne—to exemplify the kind of mess that unfolds—writes a letter to the lady Rosaline, whom he particularly fancies, and gives it to Costard to deliver, but Costard switches the letter with the one that Don Armado wrote to Jaquenetta. Jaquenetta consults with two local soothsayers and determines that the letter was written by Berowne; she passes the information on to the King.

Eavesdropping. Alerted to the spread of insubordination, in the ranks of the Scholarly Team, the King, and eventually the other two of his associates, begin to eavesdrop on one another, often from practically adjoining bushes, and soon discover that all the three gentlemen have picked out their favorites, and are writing them long and flowery epistles—points where Shakespeare is particularly lavish with subtle pedantries. At this point the King comes down hard, accusing his colleagues of breaking their oaths, but at that he is reminded by Berowne—the most loquacious of the lords—that His Royal Highness is manifestly smitten by the French Princess.

Yank. This pertinent observation seems to jerk the French nobles into a sudden self-awareness; they begin to see themselves, rather than simply to be themselves, and in a spirit of highjinks—antic, we might say—they dress themselves up in Muscovite masquerade and play would be wooers to the same set of ladies, who see right through them, and make them the fools.(The men are in the end so impressed by the ladies' insight and wit, that they apologize profoundly.) In the final scenes of the play the men and women come to terms, recognizing that they may have a destiny together, but that they must wait to let it ripen. Meantime the news arrives that the Princess' father has died, and that the ladies must return to France for the mourning period.

Finale. At the conclusion of the play a play within a play is presented, by the assembled rustics—Costard, Moth—and don Armado; *The Nine Worthies*. Much scuffling and good natured wordplay transpires, before the news of the death of the Princess' father, and the dissolution of the play within and the play itself. The title of the overall play amply justifies itself.

THEMES

Chastity. From the outset of the play, the King and his men struggle with the problem of chastity; it is the reason for their constitutional decision to devote three years to study and abstention from women, and it is the reason why the Princess of France, and her sisters, are obliged to camp outside the King's palace. From the outset of their encampment, the men more or less besiege the ladies, attacking them with wit, masquerades, and (to us, even in our enlightened moment) startlingly explicit talk about male sexual desire and (for example) ways in which it can promote women's sexual pleasure. The reader will want to approach this entire theme from an understanding of the burgeoning new role of female sexuality in the societies of the Renaissance, a period during which, for example, male sexuality felt itself besieged by that thread of cuckoldry, which for Shakespeare's male characters is a constant threat.

Wit From the start, *Love's Labor's Lost* bristles with puns—classical, erotic, purely verbal or aural—which abound throughout the play. The punning encounters between the King's three men, and the ladies encamped before the palace of Navarre, are an endless feast of wit, which ends by seeming—wit does—the condition of language itself, turned in on itself. It is as though language is a self-consuming artefact which shlorps up into it history, individuals, and historical decisions. Feeding on the immanent stuff of

meaning, in this language, is the unique challenge, even pleasure, of reading a play, like the present, as a single unfolding text, which is constantly replacing itself.

Politics Shakespeare offers us here a panoply of political actions, those of the King and his men, to withdraw from action, and those of the Princess of France, to acquire territory for her nation. All of these moves, within society, are presented as actions in language, as confrontations, strategies for living, put downs or suck ups, the names of things to do or being done. The audience, or the reader, is following the courses of speech, in a set of simulated actions, which increment to a drama in the mind. Shakespeare is never ill at ease when it comes to creating a word world, where experiments in actual politics, polis-building, transpire.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Berowne

Character The choice of the name Berowne is arbitrary, here, and simply illustrates the fashion in which this almost earliest of Shakespeare's plays develops its plot—by tangles and entanglements of wordplay, by assaults and defenses in language. Berowne is arguably the most self-reflective creation in language, in the midst of a bevy of seething verbal fencings. What Berowne harvests, from thought, is awareness that he may well not keep his oath of study and chastity, but that he will do his best, and support his fellows.

*Or having sworn too hard-a-keeping oath,
Surely to break it, and not break my troth.*

Weak, vulnerable, faithful, human: Berowne surmounts his fellow word-clusters by the complexity of his presence.

Parallels The humanistic position, critical, erudite, complicit with mortality and its flaws, reflects perfectly in the highly developed Berowne; Montaigne would be a good brother for him. So, to throw out some great names in philosophy as sophistication, one might turn to thinkers like George Santayana, the Spanish philosopher, or the Italian art critic, Bernard Berenson. And for a mellow humanist, both self-disciplined and self-indulgent, how about the German philosopher of Greek culture, Werner Jaeger? Scholars, critics, moralists, steeped in the wisdom of Humanism, these high modern intelligences all bring Berowne into full currency.

Illustrative moments

Transgressive Berowne is the one with the caustic insight, understanding as he does that gaining knowledge is about transgression, eating forbidden fruit.

*Come on, then, I will swear to study so,
To know the thing I am forbid to know.*

Yielding Berowne is the first of the present players to realize the force that necessity will finally bring to bear against their resolve.

*Necessity will make us all forsworn
Three thousand times within this three years space.*

Idealist Berowne is one of the men, when it comes to adoration of the female. He differs only in his higher degree of sensitivity to men's weakness.

*For when would you, my lord, or you, or you,
Have found the ground of study's excellence,
Without the beauty of a woman's face?*

Realist Humanist, but realist, Berowne is the one who nails the real issue with the king's declaration of monastic withdrawal. He goes to the heart of the human condition. Even when he too, at the end, is made to seem a hypocrite, he is able to reply 'I told you so.'

Discussion questions

By making language central in this play, Shakespeare may seem to lighten his play, which is, after all, a comedy. But is the author achieving a deeper point, about mankind, by reducing mankind to a kind of self-consciousness? Is Shakespeare elevating the importance of consciousness, the glory of the fallible animal, mankind?

What role do the rustics and local wisecrackers play in this drama which is concerned with life on the royal level? Do the erudite, like Holofernes, add a level of mockery toward high society? What about Costard, the clown, and Moth the page? Is the author looking for ever new ways to ridicule the pretensions of the nobles?

Are you startled by the overt discussions of female sexuality and the continual reference to the penis in this play? Would any of this discussion be permissible on the stage, today, especially on the High Stage of Broadway Drama?