

Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*

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These study materials are produced for use with the Classic Players production of *Love's Labour's Lost*.

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Love and Language in *Love's Labour's Lost*

Love's Labour's Lost dates from the early period of Shakespeare's writing, yet it impresses theatergoers as a highly polished, dramatically effective play. Its language and its plot, in fact, make it one of Shakespeare's liveliest, most lavish romantic comedies.

The rhetorical flourishes and highly-patterned verse of *Love's Labour's Lost* provide good evidence of the love of language that typified the Elizabethan age and Shakespeare himself. The play is unique among his works for its sheer number of puns, quibbles and retorts. In Shakespeare's comedies love is characteristically a war of wits, and clever talk is the major weapon.

The script's brilliant verbal high jinks and ornate poetry are well matched by an energetic, engaging plot, the second element on which Shakespeare lavished his creative efforts in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The plot depicts the fun and folly of falling in love for no fewer than five couples.

The simple story begins with a campaign launched by four young bachelors: the king of Navarre and his courtiers Berowne, Longaville and Dumaine. They agree to devote themselves entirely to the study of philosophy as a means of attaining eternal fame. Their plan to create an exclusive academy reflects quite simply their pride and lack of common sense. To insure each other's loyalty to the scheme, the men sign an oath to study according to a very rigorous schedule for three years; fast one day in the week; sleep only three hours per night; and avoid even the sight of a woman.

In the context of Shakespeare's comedies, anyone who so mocks Love is foreordained to failure. Thus the men are soon mocked themselves when the princess of France and her waiting women Rosaline, Maria and Katherine arrive at Navarre's court. One by one, the aspiring scholars are smitten by Love, and they all break their solemn oaths to make the kingdom of Navarre "the wonder of the world."

The men's almost simultaneous falls to Cupid's arrows initiate a series of games, pastimes and courting rituals which allow four pairs of courtly lovers to hurl witty barbs at each other. The fifth couple—the vain Spaniard, Don Armado, and the common dairymaid, Jaquenetta—provide a parody of the aristocratic lovers in the main plot.



Annette Pait as the princess of France and Ron Pyle as the king of Navarre in the Classic Players 2009 production of *Love's Labour's Lost*

Why is the play entitled *Love's Labour's Lost*? Why do the men fail to win the hands of the women in the end? It is because the women perceive that the men's "labors of love," or attempts to woo them, do not progress beyond the level of superficial talk to true love. Instead, their courting is primarily self-indulgence and show. The princess remarks of their elaborate wooing, "They do it but in mocking merriment."

Granted, the men are skilled at the game of trivial romantic talk. They are even reasonably successful in holding their own in humorous banter with the women. But in the end, their wit, artificial sonnets and superficial masque do not bring the immediate gratification they seek—and young lovers in Shakespeare's comedies usually find—in love. As Berowne remarks, "Our wooing doth not end like an old play; Jack hath not Jill." *Love's Labour's Lost* is Shakespeare's only romantic comedy that does not end in betrothal or marriage.

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Love and Language, *continued*

Navarre and his men fail to communicate genuine love because they fail to make the true feelings of the women they woo their highest priorities. The play suggests that in love, even more so than in everyday conversation, the effective communicator must respond to the heart and mind of his hearer. Language which makes its mark in love must be honest and self-effacing.

The men's verbal style reveals their self-indulgence most notably on two occasions. First, they make hilarious mockery of a pageant performed poorly but earnestly by a group of well-meaning commoners, "his lordship's simple neighbors." The ladies encourage the actors, but the men deride and interrupt them in a way that is "not generous, not gentle, not humble."

Second, when the play's lighthearted atmosphere "begins to cloud" at the announcement of the death of the king of France, Navarre insensitively continues wooing the princess, asking for her love "at the latest minute of the hour." The princess recognizes that timing is essential to making a "world-without-end bargain." She therefore turns to larger responsibilities which must take precedence over wooing games. She will mourn her father's death while Navarre's love undergoes the test of time.

The conclusion of *Love's Labour's Lost* is certainly not hopeless for the scholars-turned-suitors. Love's labors are suspended for a time—in this case a year and a day—but not entirely lost. Instead of consenting to the men's proposals, the women send them away for a prescribed period of service and soul-searching. To achieve a more mature view of language and love, the men must leave the park in which they foolishly sought to confine themselves and enter the world of reality, where they will confront the ravages of time and death apart from the women and each other.

The princess requires the king of Navarre to spend a year in a hermitage, and Rosaline sends Berowne off for the same period to visit the sick and endeavor to make them laugh, a venture which should teach him the true value of wit. In this manner the play suggests that genuine love motivates people to go beyond their own selfish natures and identify with others' needs and desires. It also implies that true love will endure through time and the hardships it brings.

Those made foolish by misusing the language of love are not the only subjects of Shakespeare's mockery in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The play also ridicules Academia's fools, or those who reduce learning to foolish prattle. The subplot depicts "a great feast of language" indulged in by a braggart, a schoolmaster, a ready-witted youth and a clown. Armado with his lofty pretense, Holofernes with his pointless pedantry, and Dull and Costard, who abuse language because they misunderstand it—all these characters experience the absurd consequences of the misuse of language.

For the humorous characters of the subplot as well as for the lords and ladies in Shakespeare's main plot, the point of *Love's Labour's Lost* is the same: The best language—and the best labors of love—are simple, direct and selfless. ❁

Oath-Taking and Oath-Breaking in *Love's Labour's Lost*

"Let us once lose our oaths to find ourselves,
Or else we lose ourselves to keep our oaths.
It is religion to be thus forsworn." —Berowne

"But if a man at any time shall, either of
ignorance or of malice, promise and swear to
do anything which is either against the law of
Almighty God or not in his power to perform,
let him take it for an unlawful and ungodly
oath." —Homily against Swearing and Perjury

Elizabethans regarded oath-taking very seriously. Whereas we rarely take an oath except perhaps in a court of law, it was not unusual for a person in Shakespeare's society to confirm an everyday commercial transaction with an oath. Most oaths were considered solemn and binding.

Navarre and his courtiers Berowne, Longaville and Dumaine take not one but two oaths in *Love's Labour's Lost*, and in both they renounce or forsake that which they have sworn they will do. The words *swear*, *forswear* and *oath* appear many times in the play as if to call attention to the men's vows.

The first oath—never to see women—the men take in an effort to attain fame and honor. Navarre's opening speech suggests that in defiance of ravenous, "devouring Time," he and his courtiers will become "heirs of all eternity" by pursuing knowledge and the contemplative life.

It is apparent from the beginning of *Love's Labour's Lost* that the four lords of Navarre will break their foolish oath to devote themselves to a solitary intellectual life. The artificial lifestyle it obligates them to fosters and is fostered by pride and a kind of pagan stoicism. As Berowne later remarks, because the oath runs contrary to nature, it is "Flat treason against the kingly state of youth."

As the play unfolds, Berowne rationalizes a way out of the oath, and the forsworn scholars become lovesick sonneteers. Their revised point of view on what is truly permanent parallels that of Shakespeare's sonnets on the ravages of Time, namely that only love and poetry will endure.

Thus since their oath to enforce the high ideals of the Academy is unnatural and unreasonable, the breaking of it is more delightful than dangerous. Berowne argues that they are not breaking their vow at all. After all, ladies' eyes are the best books of all.

Shakespeare's Theme in *Love's Labour's Lost*

WHAT THE Literary Critics Say

Love's Labour's Lost "is a comedy of notions, in which a blatantly false ideal is overcome by common sense and love is permitted to prevail." —Charles Boyce



"All utopian dreams run afoul of human needs, desires and nature. Life is the tutor of words, not words the master of life." —T. E. Kalem



"*Love's Labour's Lost* is ultimately more about language than about love. There is a profound disjunction between what the young men say and what they feel, and it's each lover's task to match his words to his feelings. Concerned with the tension between affection and affectation, the play asks if language can be a mouthpiece of the heart." —Norrie Epstein



The Geneva Bible, in fact, offers a better rationalization for oathbreaking in this case than Berowne's: "Cause not thyself to sin by vowing rashly: as they who do make a vow to live unmarried, and such like" (marginal gloss at Ecclesiastes 5:1-6). In its Homily against Swearing and Perjury, the Anglican Church of Shakespeare's day also posits, "If a man at any time shall, either of ignorance or of malice, promise and swear to do anything which is either against the law of Almighty God or not in his power to perform: let him take it for an unlawful and ungodly oath." The homily argues that it is equally wrong for a man to forswear himself and to keep an unlawful or unadvised oath.

The second time Navarre and his courtiers are forsworn is of greater consequence in Shakespeare's comic ending than their breaking of the ascetic vows they take in the play's first scene. When the lords disguise

WHAT THE Theater Professionals Say

"Only love, never intellect, brings true wisdom."
—Emma Tennant, actress



"*Love's Labour's Lost* is a fun, beautifully sweet comedy about love and romance in which four well intentioned, but misguided young men discover the impossibility of denying the power of true love." —Russell Jackson, dramaturg



"*Love's Labour's Lost* is a young man's play without the cynicism about marriage and women that you find, for example, in *Much Ado about Nothing*. Shakespeare enjoys, and we enjoy with him, the expression of just how silly men can become when they fall madly in love." —Kenneth Branagh, actor, director, producer



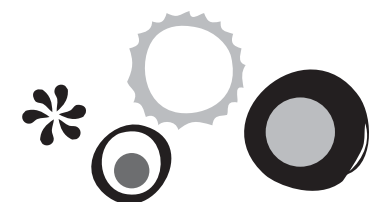
"*Love's Labour's Lost* transports us on a journey from the empty vows and ideals of youth to the understanding that comes with age and experience." —Ina Marlowe, director



themselves as Russians and attempt to court the ladies, they are confronted with a counterplot. The ladies have disguised themselves, and each suitor swears his love to the wrong woman.

In the finale the princess says to Navarre, "Your oath I will not trust"; Rosaline to Berowne, "You are attaint with faults and perjury"; and Katherine to Dumaine, "Yet swear not, lest ye be forsworn again."

It is with good reason, then, that in the end of *Love's Labour's Lost* the women find it necessary to test the men's ability to keep a vow. The men must prove themselves faithful; their words must become deeds. The prospects for their doing so and thus for an eventual happy conclusion to love's labors are unmistakably bright. ❁



Who's Who in

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST

WM SHAKESPEARE

* The Princess of France

"A maid of grace and complete majesty," the daughter of the ailing king of France comes to Navarre's court to settle an old financial score between him and her father. As the plot unfolds, she proves an intelligent observer and a candid spokesperson for truth and reality. Even though she falls in love with the king, she directs him and his lords away from shallow wit and insincere hyperbole to more realistic, humane values.

With her sensible humor and feminine practicality, the princess reveals the high-flown pretensions of Ferdinand and his courtiers and rebukes them for breaking their word. When news comes that her father has died, she is the character who proposes a period of separation between the courtiers and the French women they woo. Thus she returns to France to mourn her father's death.

* Rosaline

Rosaline, companion of the French princess, is a woman of "a merry, nimble, stirring spirit" and "a light heart" who falls in love with Berowne. She engages in a war of wits with him throughout the play yet never loses sight of truth and reality. In the end she sends Berowne away to entertain "groaning wretches" in a hospital for a year before she will plight her troth to him.



Ferdinand, King of Navarre *

In pursuit of fame, Navarre attempts to turn his court into a sophisticated academy of men who have forsworn any contact with women. He later suspends the decree when he falls in love with the daughter of the French king. Although Navarre is a "bundle of phrases" (Granville-Barker), he is not sensitive to their meanings. His suit is temporarily lost when he continues to court the princess after she receives news of her father's death. In the end he agrees to endure the hardships of the real world by spending a year in "some forlorn and naked hermitage." Afterwards, he hopes, the princess will marry him.

Berowne *

From the beginning this "merry madcap lord" attendant on the king of Navarre is skeptical of the oath for establishing an all-male contemplative society, recognizing it as contrary to human nature. Nevertheless, he promises to "keep what [he has] sworn."

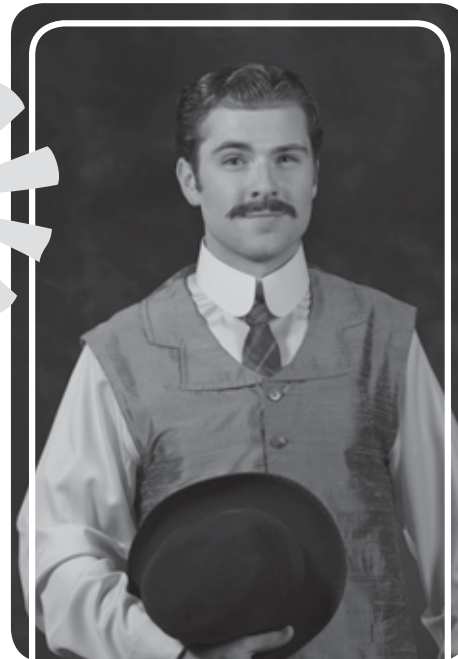
After he falls in love with Rosaline, he discovers that his three fellows are also in love. When Costard delivers Berowne's letter to the wrong woman, the missive falls into the king's hands, and Berowne is exposed as an oath-breaker.

A man of fine words and carefully wrought arguments, he is urged by Rosaline to abandon all artifice for plain, natural speech. In the end Rosaline sends him off to entertain the sick with his wit for a year before she will marry him.

Berowne's verbal dexterity, sense of humor and common sense make him the dominant male in the play. He is also the character with the most lines. Berowne's understanding runs deeper than that of the other men, yet it has no positive effect on his behavior.

✿ María

María, also part of the retinue of the princess of France, agrees to marry Longaville, who falls in love with her, after she spends a year mourning with her lady.



Longaville ✿

Longaville attends Navarre and willingly takes the oath of allegiance to the king's scheme for creating an exclusive academy and avoiding the company of women. He falls in love with María and composes a sonnet for her, arguing that because she is a goddess rather than a woman, he is not forsworn.

María describes Longaville as "a sharp wit match'd with too blunt a will," but her comments in the play's conclusion give him good reason to believe that she will consent in a year's time to become his wife.



Costard ☉

Costard is a clown, or dense person, who is jailed for talking with Jacquenetta after Navarre's edict to establish an exclusive male society at court has been made public. In his capacity as messenger, Costard mixes up a love letter from Berowne to Rosaline with Don Armado's to Jacquenetta.

✿ Katherine

Katherine accompanies the princess of France to the court of Navarre, where she falls in love with Dumaine, whom she considers a man of "great worthiness." She teasingly tells him at last that if after a year she has "much love," she will give him "some."



Dumaine ✿

Another of Navarre's courtiers, the "well-accomplish'd youth" Dumaine is a man who "hath a wit to make an ill shape good." He is enthusiastic about the creation of an academy until his eyes fall on Katherine. Although he must wait a year for her hand, he promises to remain her faithful servant.



Don Adriano de Armado ☉

A pompous and magnificently dressed Spaniard, Don Armado strikes an absurd pose as a visitor to the court of Navarre, where he becomes rival to the clown Costard for the hand of the dairymaid Jacquenetta. He is described as a "braggart" in the stage directions, and his flowery rhetoric and "vain tongue" make him a laughingstock for the courtiers.

The schoolmaster Holofernes offers an apt description of the Spaniard: "His humor is lofty, his discourse peremptory, his tongue filed, his eye ambitious, his gait majestic, and his general behavior vain, ridiculous, and [boastful]."



Love's Labour's Lost Plot: The Short of It

The action of *Love's Labour's Lost* spans a two-day time period and takes place on the palace grounds of Navarre, an old kingdom that extended from northern Spain into France. There a king and three of his young lords agree to devote three years to an austere program of study, conceived to bring them eternal fame. They swear an oath of loyalty to the scheme, agreeing to, among other unnatural prohibitions, never allow a woman to come within a mile of them.

The king and his lords forget, however, that the princess of France will visit Navarre imminently on a diplomatic mission. No sooner have they signed the oath than she arrives with three of her companions.

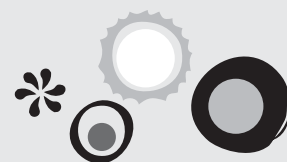
One by one the men fall in love with the ladies: the king of Navarre with the princess of France; Berowne with Rosaline; Longaville with Maria; and Dumaine with Katherine. In a parallel plot, Armado, an affected Spaniard visiting the court, spars with the country clown Costard for the favors of Jacquenetta, the village wench.

Compelled by two different men to deliver love letters, Costard bungles the task. Thus Armado's fantastical musings on romance go to the French princess and company, and Berowne's love sonnet to Rosaline is read to Jacquenetta.

The schoolmaster Holofernes instructs Jacquenetta to show Berowne's letter to the king. Just as she does so, the lords in quick succession discover each other reading love poems. Berowne rationalizes their breaking of the Academy oath by arguing that women's eyes are, in fact, books. Thus Navarre's academy of learning is transformed into a school of love, where woman's beauty is the noblest of all studies.

The ladies play a practical joke on the lords by exchanging identities when the lords come, disguised as Russians, to entertain and court them. Consequently each man swears his love to the wrong woman.

In the finale Armado and the village commoners perform the masque of the Nine Worthies to entertain the lords and their French ladies. Before the play reaches its conclusion, however, Marcade interrupts with sad news of the king of France's death. The princess prepares to return home with her ladies. Collectively the women put their lovers on probation for a year and a day, after which time they promise to give an answer to the men's proposals of marriage.



Love's Labour's Past ❁



The 1962 *Classic Players* production of *Love's Labour's Lost* featured Don Montecath as the king of Navarre; Alice Mathes as the princess of France; Arend ten Pas as Berowne (in Russian disguise), and Joan Veith as Moth, Don Armado's page.



Lonnie Polson appeared as Don Armado and Rebecca Greer Clements as Jacquenetta in the 2001 *Classic Players* production of *Love's Labour's Lost*.



(left to right) Brock Miller as Dumaine, Champ Thornton as Longaville, Marius Pundys as Berowne, and Nathan Bennett as Ferdinand in the 2001 *Classic Players* production of *Love's Labour's Lost*