Love’s Labour’s Lost  
Introduction for The Show Must Go Online  
Streamed live on 13 May 2020  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYUgqkpf5FE

Love’s Labour’s Lost always seems – to me, at least – to be overlooked when it comes to Shakespeare’s comedies. In fact, it’s thought it wasn’t performed at all for almost two hundred years.\(^1\) Admittedly it is rather thin on plot – but that’s not necessarily a bad thing, and it is big on fun. The director Harley Granville-Barker once asked: ‘Did Shakespeare ever do anything more delightful than Love’s Labour’s Lost?’\(^2\) There’s certainly a lot to enjoy, even if it hasn’t been at the top of producers’ ‘To Do’ lists in recent years.

As someone with an interest in Shakespeare on radio, I’ve found that it’s one of the least performed plays in that medium – and hasn’t been heard on air for more than forty years. While on TV, the last British production was in 1985. Kenneth Branagh did make a film of it in the year 2000 – but he cut three-quarters of the text.\(^3\) So it still feels like the play is a little unloved. Hopefully tonight will help put that right.

Nathan Lane, who appeared in Branagh’s film, described Love’s Labour’s Lost as ‘deeply silly’.\(^4\) While Michelle Terry – who’s appeared in it at both the RSC and Shakespeare’s Globe – has said it has ‘joie de vivre’.\(^5\) It does have both those qualities – but personally, the thing I love most about it is the women.

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\(^4\) Nathan Lane ‘Featurette’, in Love’s Labour’s Lost, dir. Kenneth Branagh (Pathe, 1999) [on DVD].

\(^5\) Michelle Terry ‘The Language of Love’s Labour’s Lost’, in Love’s Labour’s Lost, dir, Christopher Luscombe (RSC, 2015) [on DVD].
Many people would probably consider Shakespeare’s greatest female character – certainly in a comedy – to be Rosalind in *As You Like It*. But she has a predecessor with a surprisingly similar name who could definitely give her a run for her money on word play and wit. Rosaline in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is one of a quartet of strong women who are more than a match for the four men who fall hopelessly in love with them.

The play begins with the King of Navarre – and his three friends, Dumaine, Longaville and the reluctant Berowne – vowing to give up all worldly pleasures to study for three years. This includes seeing women. Of course, what happens next, but they’re promptly forced to abandon their pledges, with the appearance of the Princess of France and her three friends – Katherine, Maria and Rosaline. It doesn’t take much to work out where the plot might be going from here! What is interesting, though, is the portrayal of the two different sexes. The boys – and I will call them boys in this case, because they do behave just like a bunch of nerdy teenagers – go all to pieces at the first sign of female company! It’s as if they’ve never seen a woman before – they all immediately fall head over heels in love! There’s a wonderful scene in the play where each in turn agonises over the love poetry they’re trying to write. It could be Adrian Mole or maybe Simon from *The Inbetweeners*. They’ve been described as ‘fickle and silly’, ‘immature’, even ‘exhibitionist’. But they are earnest young men and they do believe that they’re genuinely, deeply in love… albeit with a bit of mischief thrown in along the way.

The women, on the other hand, are the grown-ups. Critics have described them as ‘intelligent’ and ‘sensible’. But that doesn’t mean they’re not susceptible to a bit of romance. In fact, before they even meet the boys, they gossip about them. But they regard love and relationships in a much more mature way than their male counterparts. While the men write

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6 Woudhuysen, p. 9, p. 32, p. 32.
7 Woudhuysen, p. 9.
poetry and send the women gifts, the women take the mickey out of them, and set them up for a fall. As the Princess and Rosaline say: ‘We are wise girls to mock our lovers so. / They are worse fools to purchase mocking so.’ The women are intensely aware that the men might not be genuine in their affections – whether they realise it or not – and they aren’t going to get caught easily. In fact, the Princess later says to the men that she and her friends have ‘met your loves / In their own fashion, like a merriment’, something the men protest against, declaring they were in earnest all along – however daft their behaviour might have been.

H. R. Woudhuysen, in his introduction to the Arden edition of this play, says ‘as always in Shakespearean comedy, the women are cleverer and wittier than the men’. I knew there was a reason why I liked Shakespeare! And the repartee between the main characters really shows this off. There’s some wonderful banter between the lovers – and the women always get the upper hand. Michelle Terry has described the women’s language as ‘their weapon, their armour, their power’ – something echoed by the Princess’s attendant, Lord Boyet, who says in the play: ‘The tongues of mocking wenches are as keen / As is the razor’s edge’. There’s obviously an element of women having to use words when they have little other power. But the power they do have – over these infatuated men – they execute mercilessly.

One of the ways they do this by pointing out the fact the boys seem unable to stick to their promises… which brings me on to the words ‘forswear’ and forsworn’. Although they sound very similar, they have subtly different meanings which are worth bearing in mind. If someone ‘forswears’ something, they’re promising to give it up… So at the start of the play

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10 Woudhuysen, p. 42.
11 Terry, ‘The Language of Love’s Labour’s Lost’.
the boys forswear seeing women… But to be ‘forsworn’ is to break an oath or a promise. It’s when you’ve sworn you won’t do something, and then you do. Berowne, in a wonderful speech where he argues that the boys were right to give up study for the women, uses both words… telling his friends that they are all forsworn – that they’ve broken their promises – but that they were fools to forswear women in the first place – in other words, they should never have pledged not to see the women.

Like a lot of the early plays, Love’s Labour’s Lost celebrates language like this, in an ‘elaborate embroidery’ ‘for it’s own sake’, as Granville-Barker put it. The play is mainly written in verse, more than a third of it rhymed – making it the most heavily rhymed of all Shakespeare’s plays. You’ll probably have noticed how much of last week’s Comedy of Errors features rhyming and there’s more to come in Richard The Second and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. And rhyming isn’t the only thing Love’s Labour’s has in common with The Dream. Just like the adventures of the lovers in the wood near Athens, which ends with the Mechanicals’ play, so Love’s Labour’s Lost also finishes with a performance – in this case a pageant masterminded by the schoolmaster, Holofernes, and curate, Sir Nathaniel. They also use language to the extreme, but in their case it’s more about showing off their supposed erudition. Some of this language is quite dense – and there’s a liberal sprinkling of Latin too – but please don’t be concerned about that. Michelle Terry has said that Shakespeare was writing sensorily in this play – and that’s a good way to think of it. Don’t worry about getting every word these two say, just feel it. A bit like nonsense poetry – it’s the overall sense of it that matters, not the individual words.

14 Woudhuysen, p. 49.
15 Terry, ‘The Language of Love’s Labour’s Lost’. 
Holofernes and Sir Nathaniel team up with our final main character, the ‘magnificent’ Spaniard Don Armado,\textsuperscript{16} whose extraordinary use of English leads to one of the least \textit{double} of \textit{double entendres}. Together they mangle the language in the most marvellous ways. As Armado’s page, Moth, says: ‘They have been at a great feast of languages, and stolen the scraps.’\textsuperscript{17} Thankfully, as is often the way, the scraps are the best bit!

Don Armado is also one half of the fifth set of lovers in the play. Like the other boys, he falls hopelessly, childishly in love, in his case not with a lady of the court, but with the country wench Jaquenetta. However, she’s also been receiving attentions from the yokel, Costard. Shakespeare never makes clear which one she would rather be with – and unfortunately, unlike her courtly counterparts, Jaquenetta doesn’t actually get to say a great deal. Like some of Shakespeare’s more controversial women, such as Isabella in \textit{Measure for Measure}, she doesn’t get to tell us in the end who she chooses, although one of the men does speak for her…

While I’m talking about \textit{Love’s Labour’s Lost}, I feel I must just mention the possibility that it did, at one time, have a sequel. A couple of contemporary sources tantalisingly mention \textit{Love’s Labour’s Won}.\textsuperscript{18} There’s been lots of speculation about this – and whether it might be an alternative title for one of the plays we do still have. Various theories have been put forward – \textit{All’s Well That Ends Well} and even \textit{Troilus and Cressida} have been suggested, along with \textit{Much Ado About Nothing}\textsuperscript{19} – something the Royal Shakespeare Company put to the test a few years back when they used the same cast to stage both \textit{Love’s Labour’s} and \textit{Much Ado}, which they retitled \textit{Love’s Labour’s Won}. The nice thing about \textit{The Show Must Go Online} is that as we work through Shakespeare’s plays you’ll

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{16} Shakespeare, ‘\textit{Love’s Labour’s Lost’}, 1.1.188.
\item\textsuperscript{17} Shakespeare, ‘\textit{Love’s Labour’s Lost’}, 5.1.35-36.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Woudhuysen, p. 78-79.
\item\textsuperscript{19} Woudhuysen, p. 80-81.
\end{itemize}
be able to see for yourself whether you think any of them is the most likely contender for *Love’s Labour’s Won*. Personally, I can definitely see some of the similarities between Berowne in tonight’s play and Benedick in *Much Ado* – but that might be as much about the fact I love both plays as anything else.

Woudhuysen describes *Love’s Labour’s Lost* as one of Shakespeare’s ‘cleverest and funniest’ plays. He sums it up, saying it’s rooted in the Elizabethan period, but ‘its handling of the very themes of love and loss, of the relationships between men and women, of endings and of art still speaks to us.’ Certainly the theme of love is never going to go out of fashion, nor is the battle of the sexes. I do have one warning, though. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is a lovely romp – a proper romantic comedy. But as Berowne says towards the end: ‘Our wooing doth not end like an old play’. So be prepared for an expected twist…

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Terry, Michelle, ‘The Language of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*’, in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, dir, Christopher Luscombe (RSC, 2015) [on DVD]


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20 Woudhuysen, p. 1.
21 Woudhuysen, p. 106.