

**A Guide to
LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST**

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare probably wrote *Love's Labour's Lost* during the period 1594–6. He had just turned thirty, and was already a rising star in the world of London theatre.

Having left his home town of Stratford-upon-Avon in his early twenties, Shakespeare had started as a novice actor, but quickly turned to writing. His success soon attracted the envious attention of the established London author Robert Greene, who in 1592 scathingly described the provincial newcomer, the actor-turned-playwright who lacked a university education, as ‘an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers’.

In 1594, Shakespeare took the significant step of becoming a member – and shareholder – of a newly-formed company of actors, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men: they were soon to become London’s most successful theatre company, and Shakespeare would go on to work with the same group for the rest of his career. *Love's Labour's Lost* was one of the first plays – possibly the first – that Shakespeare wrote for the new company. The play was immediately popular, both at the public theatres and at private performances for Queen Elizabeth’s court.

Love's Labour's Lost is a bright, witty comedy that revels in the use – and abuse – of language. Shakespeare mocks the linguistic excesses and sophistication of courtly life in this play; at the same time, he clearly enjoys indulging himself in the characters’ constant games of wordplay. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, there is more verse – in the form of rhyming couplets, songs, poems, even complete sonnets – than in any other Shakespeare play:

“We all have particular favorites, in literature as in life, and I take more unmixed pleasure from Love’s Labour’s Lost than from any other Shakespearean play ... I entertain the illusion that Shakespeare may have enjoyed a particular and unique zest in composing it. Love’s Labour’s Lost is a festival of language, an exuberant fireworks display in which Shakespeare seems to seek the limits of his verbal resources, and discovers that there are none.”

Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 1998

A devotion to knowledge

Nestled in the Pyrenees between France and Spain lies the little Kingdom of Navarre, ruled over by King Ferdinand. Although his kingdom is small, Ferdinand has great ambitions: he is determined that Navarre will be known throughout the world, and for all time, as a byword for learning, art and philosophy.

With this in mind, the king has enlisted the help of three young courtiers to join him in forming a group of dedicated scholars who, setting aside all worldly pleasures, will devote their lives entirely to study for the next three years.

Two of the courtiers, full of enthusiasm and idealism, are eager to begin their noble undertaking. The third, although he has agreed in principle, has misgivings. He is troubled, in particular, by one condition that the king has imposed on the foursome: for the duration of their three-year pursuit of knowledge, female company is strictly forbidden.

Curtain up

Good intentions

I, i

King Ferdinand is addressing three of his lords, Longaville, Dumaine and Berowne.

Achieving a glorious reputation, the king declares, should be the true aim of life; only those who do so will live on, in name, after their death. This is the purpose of his present plan for himself and his three companions:

King: Let fame, that all hunt after in their lives,
Live registered upon our brazen tombs,¹
And then grace us in the disgrace of death;²
When, spite of cormorant devouring Time,³
Th'endeavour of this present breath may buy
That honour which shall bate his scythe's keen edge,
And make us heirs of all eternity.⁴

¹ *be inscribed on brass plaques on our graves*

² *make us honoured even when our bodies have been disfigured by death*

³ *in spite of Time, which devours everything like an aggressive, ravenous bird*

⁴ *the efforts that we make in our lifetimes may bring us honour that will blunt the edge of Time's sharp scythe, and keep our memory alive for ever*

Ferdinand's proposal is that he and his friends should spend three years completely isolated from worldly affairs, devoting themselves instead to study and scholarly contemplation. The king's ambition is not just for himself and his companions, however. His court, and indeed the whole country, will become renowned far and wide:

King: Navarre shall be the wonder of the world;
Our court shall be a little academe,¹
Still and contemplative in living art.²

¹ *like the famed Academy of Plato in ancient Greece*

² *calmly and steadily studying life's essential knowledge*

The three courtiers have already agreed to dedicate themselves, along with the king, to a secluded life of learning for the next

three years. The king now demands their written assurance that they will remain faithful to their promise. He has drawn up a document setting out the rules that will govern their lives during the long period of study, and he asks his friends to sign it.

Two of the lords consent enthusiastically. They are only too willing, they claim, to abstain from the pleasures of the world:

King: Your oaths are passed, and now subscribe¹ your names,
That his own hand may strike his honour down
That violates the smallest branch herein² ...

Longaville: I am resolved. 'Tis but a three years' fast.
The mind shall banquet, though the body pine.³
Fat paunches have lean pates⁴ ...

Dumaine: My loving lord, Dumaine is mortified.⁵
The grosser manner of these world's delights
He throws upon the gross world's baser slaves.⁶

¹ *sign*

² *so that any man who disobeys a single clause of this agreement will be shown, by his own hand, to be dishonourable*

³ *starve*

⁴ *a full, well-fed belly is a sign of a weak mind*

⁵ *dead to worldly gratification*

⁶ *I leave the cruder kinds of pleasure to inferior people who are addicted to such things*

Shakespeare seems to have been an avid reader as well as a keen observer of human nature. However, unlike most literary figures of his time, he did not go to university:

“The premise of the King’s exercise is that there is no place for love in intellectual life. Shakespeare, who did not of course spend three years in the all-male environment of an Oxford or Cambridge college, clearly thought that this was nonsense ...”

Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age*, 2008

A reluctant recruit

The third lord, Berowne, is more hesitant. He has agreed to engage in a long period of study with the others, but suspects that the conditions imposed by the king will be too harsh.

Aware that the king has in mind a three-year period of complete abstinence and self-denial, Berowne looks dubiously at the document that his friends have signed. He is unwilling to agree to it, he declares, if its contents are as extreme as he fears:

Berowne: So much, dear liege,¹ I have already sworn,
That is, to live and study here three years.
But there are other strict observances:
As² not to see a woman in that term,
Which I hope well is not enrolled there;³
And one day in a week to touch no food,
And but⁴ one meal on every day beside,
The which I hope is not enrolled there;
And then to sleep but three hours in the night ...
O, these are barren tasks, too hard to keep,
Not to see ladies, study, fast, not sleep.

¹ *sovereign, king*

² *such as*

³ *listed, included in the document*

⁴ *only, no more than*

The others retort that Berowne is well aware of the nature of the agreement, and has already given his word. Berowne shrugs off the accusation:

King: Your oath is passed to pass away from these.¹
Berowne: Let me say no, my liege, an if you please.
I only swore to study with your Grace,
And stay here in your court for three years' space.
Longaville: You swore to that, Berowne, and to the rest.
Berowne: By yea and nay,² sir, then I swore in jest.

¹ *you have taken an oath to give up these pleasures*

² *I wasn't being serious; I swore and I didn't swear*

The pursuit of knowledge should be enlightening and enjoyable, argues Berowne; it is perverse to make it tedious and unrewarding. Learning can even be harmful if it is separated from the pleasures of life. Reading for hours on end, for example, is futile if it only results in poor eyesight. Berowne's language becomes more and more extravagant as he warms to his theme:

Berowne: Why, all delights are vain,¹ but that most vain
Which, with pain purchased, doth inherit pain:²
As³ painfully to pore upon a book
To seek the light of truth, while truth the while
Doth falsely blind the eyesight of his look.⁴
Light seeking light doth light of light beguile⁵ ...

¹ *pointless, unproductive*

² *the most pointless activity of all is one which is unpleasant and only produces further suffering*

³ *such as; for example*

⁴ *the search for truth, meanwhile, treacherously deprives the reader of his eyesight*

⁵ *the eyes, in seeking truth, deprive themselves of the power of sight (eyes were believed to produce beams of light which enabled them to see)*

Learning can become arid and meaningless if it is cut off from the emotions and experiences of everyday life, insists Berowne. He gives the example of an astronomer who spends his nights cataloguing the stars in the sky:

Berowne: Small have continual plodders ever won,
Save base authority from others' books.¹
These earthly godfathers of heaven's lights,
That give a name to every fixed star,²
Have no more profit of their shining nights
Than those that walk and wot not what they are.³

¹ *conscientious drudges have never learnt much other than commonplace, second-hand knowledge*

² *astronomers who give names to all the stars*

³ *do not appreciate the starry nights more than those who simply walk under the open sky with no idea of the stars' names*

Berowne suspects that there will be many more such occasions over the next few years. As he puts his name to the agreement, he suggests, enigmatically, that despite his reluctance he will keep to the rules for longer than his companions:

King: We must of force¹ dispense with this decree.
She must lie here on mere necessity.²

Berowne: Necessity will make us all forsworn³
Three thousand times within this three years' space ...
But I believe, although I seem so loath,
I am the last that will keep his oath. [*signs*]

¹ *necessarily, inevitably*

² *it is absolutely necessary for the princess to lodge at court*

³ *will make us all break our oaths*

The idea that female company was inimical to men's learning and spiritual development was widespread in Shakespeare's time. In 1571, the Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge – whose aim was to educate future leaders of the newly-reformed Church of England – decreed that “*all young women shal be banished and putt out of the college*” and if any scholar “*under any pretext bring any young woman into the College to entertaine, maintaine, or employ them*” he would be fined and “*publickly corrected in the hall with the rodd.*”

A minor offence

Berowne wonders what the four of them will do for entertainment, given the restrictions under which they have agreed to live. The king mentions a character who frequently keeps them amused without realising it, a pompous, boastful Spaniard with an erratic command of English. The name of the Spanish nobleman, a guest at the court of Navarre, is Don Adriano de Armado.

Another individual who may be a source of diversion is the clownish servant Costard; and just as his name is mentioned, Costard himself appears. He is evidently in trouble, as he is accompanied by the local constable, Anthony Dull. The constable produces a letter for the king from Don Armado, apparently concerning an offence committed by Costard. The situation is unclear, however, as both Dull and Costard are eccentric in their use of language:

- Dull:* Which is the Duke's own person?¹
Berowne: [*indicates the king*] This, fellow. What wouldst?²
Dull: I myself reprehend³ his own person, for I am his Grace's farborough.⁴ But I would see his own person in flesh and blood.
Berowne: This is he.
Dull: [*to the king*] Signior Arm... Arm...⁵ commends you. There's villainy abroad.⁶ This letter will tell you more.
Costard: Sir, the contempts⁷ thereof are as touching me.

¹ *which one of you is the king?*

² *what do you want?*

³ *represent*

⁴ *the king's constable*

⁵ *Dull is unable to pronounce 'Armado'*

⁶ *going on, taking place*

⁷ *contents*

The king reads the letter aloud. Don Armado's prose is lengthy and convoluted, but it eventually becomes clear that, while taking a walk in the evening, he saw something that shocked him:

- King:* [*reads*] '*Great deputy, the welkin's viceregent,¹ and sole dominator of Navarre ... besieged with sable-coloured melancholy, I did commend the black*

oppressing humour to the most wholesome physic of thy health-giving air² ... 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. Now for the ground Which – which, I mean, I walked upon. It is yclept³ thy park. Then for the place Where – where, I mean, I did encounter that obscene and most preposterous event that draweth from my snow-white pen the ebon-coloured ink⁴ ...'

¹ *the ruler appointed by Heaven*

² *feeling depressed, I decided to go outdoors for a walk*

³ *called, known as*

⁴ *that compels me to write*

It emerges that Armado saw Costard making advances towards the dairymaid Jaquenetta. Navarre has strict laws against such liaisons, the king points out: these laws are well known, and Costard must be aware of them. The young man tries to claim that he has not broken the letter of the law:

King: ... sirrah, what say you to this?

Costard: Sir, I confess the wench.¹

King: Did you hear the proclamation?

Costard: I do confess much of the hearing it, but little of the marking of it.²

King: It was proclaimed a year's imprisonment to be taken with a wench.

Costard: I was taken with none, sir, I was taken with a damsel.

King: Well, it was proclaimed 'damsel'.

Costard: This was no damsel neither, sir, she was a virgin.

King: It is so varied too,³ for it was proclaimed 'virgin'.

Costard: If it were, I deny her virginity.

¹ *that I was with the young woman*

² *I did not take much notice of it*

³ *the announcement allowed for that too*

Although *Love's Labour's Lost* was undoubtedly popular when first produced, the play fell out of favour for at least two hundred years following Shakespeare's death: some later critics did not even consider it to be the work of Shakespeare. The prominent 18th-century writer Samuel Johnson defended the play, despite his reservations:

"In this play, which all the editors have concurred to censure, and some have rejected as unworthy of our poet, it must be confessed that there are many passages mean, childish, and vulgar; and some which ought not to have been exhibited, as we are told they were, to a maiden queen. But there are scattered through the whole many sparks of genius ..."

Dr Johnson, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, 1765

Costard's arguments fall on deaf ears. However, the king, amused by Armado's letter, dismisses the young man with an insignificant punishment, to be supervised by the offended Spaniard:

King: Sir, I will pronounce your sentence: you shall fast a week with bran¹ and water.

Costard: I had rather pray a month with mutton and porridge.

King: And Don Armado shall be your keeper.

¹ *bread made from coarse, inferior grain*

Eager to start on his long interlude of scholarship and seclusion, the king sets off with his companions. Berowne remains sceptical:

King: ... go we, lords, to put in practice that
Which each to other hath so strongly sworn.

[*he leaves with Longaville and Dumaine*]

Berowne: I'll lay my head to any goodman's hat,¹
These oaths and laws will prove an idle scorn.²

¹ *I'll bet my head against any common man's hat*

² *will become worthless objects of ridicule*

A lover's lament

I, ii

Don Armado is talking to his young attendant Moth. The Spaniard tells the boy that he is in low spirits. He is in love, he complains: the emotion is not fitting for a valiant knight, he believes, and, to make things worse, the object of his love is a low-born woman. He wishes he could fight with his passion, defeat it and deliver it, like a hostage, to his enemy:

Armado: I will hereupon confess I am in love; and as it is base¹ for a soldier to love, so am I in love with a base wench. If drawing my sword against the humour of affection² would deliver me from the reprobate³ thought of it, I would take Desire prisoner, and ransom him to any French courtier ...

¹ *ignoble, disreputable*

² *inclination to fall in love*

³ *corrupt, sinful*

Armado asks the pageboy to suggest other illustrious warriors who, like him, have fallen in love. He is pleased with the boy's suggestions, revelling in a sense of fellow-feeling with the great heroes of the past:

Armado: Comfort me, boy: what great men have been in love?

Moth: Hercules, master.

Armado: Most sweet Hercules! More authority,¹ dear boy, name more; and, sweet my child, let them be men of good repute and carriage.²

Moth: Samson,³ master, he was a man of good carriage, great carriage, for he carried the town gates on his back like a porter, and he was in love.

Armado: O well-knit Samson, strong-jointed Samson! I do excel thee in my rapier as much as thou didst me in carrying gates. I am in love too.

¹ *examples from history*

² *demeanour, behaviour*

³ *biblical hero of enormous strength who heaved the city gates of Gaza onto his back and carried them away*

Armado wonders whether he should write a ballad about the pain of falling in love with a woman so far beneath his own status. He then reveals that the object of his affections is none other than Jaquenetta, the dairymaid pursued by Costard:

Armado: Is there not a ballad, boy, of 'The King and the Beggar'? ... I will have that subject newly writ o'er,¹ that I may example my digression by some mighty precedent.² Boy, I do love that country girl that I took³ in the park with the rational hind⁴ Costard. She deserves well.⁵

¹ *I will get someone to adapt the story*

² *so that I can justify my moral lapse by showing that great men of the past have been in the same situation discovered, caught*

⁴ *rustic creature, barely capable of reason*

⁵ *a better man*

At this point the constable Dull arrives with Costard and Jaquenetta in tow. He explains that Armado is to oversee Costard's punishment, while the girl will be confined to her workplace. Armado cannot hide his feelings for Jaquenetta:

Dull: Sir, the Duke's¹ pleasure is that you keep Costard safe;² and you must suffer him to take no delight nor no penance,³ but 'a⁴ must fast three days a week. For this damsel, I must keep her at the park; she is allowed for the dey-woman.⁵ Fare you well.

Armado: [*aside*] I do betray myself with blushing.

¹ *king's*

² *secure, in detention*

³ *Dull means 'pleasure'*

⁴ *he*

⁵ *permitted to work as the dairymaid*

Armado makes a clumsy attempt to declare his love, but Jaquenetta is unimpressed. As she is led away by Dull, the Spaniard turns angrily to Costard, vowing to punish him severely. He orders Moth to take the young man away and lock him up.

Now alone, Armado reflects, in his usual elaborate style, on the power of love. He cannot suppress his passion for the lowly Jaquenetta:

Armado: I do affect¹ the very ground (which is base) where her shoe (which is baser) guided by her foot (which is basest) doth tread ... Love is a devil. There is no evil angel but Love.

¹ *love, adore*

He realises that, although he is invincible as a warrior, he cannot win in the fight against Cupid. There is only one answer, he decides. He must resort to poetry:

Armado: ... His disgrace is to be called boy,¹ but his glory is to subdue men. Adieu, valour; rust, rapier; be still, drum; for your manager² is in love. Yea, he loveth. Assist me, some extemporal god of rhyme,³ for I am sure I shall turn sonnet.⁴ Devise, wit; write, pen ...

¹ *we insult Cupid by referring to him as a boy*

² *your master, the man who normally makes use of these things*

³ *god of spontaneous verse*

⁴ *become a sonneteer*

The name 'Armado' is undoubtedly a satirical reference to the Spanish Armada of 1588; the failed attempt to invade England and depose Queen Elizabeth was still fresh in people's memories when *Love's Labour's Lost* was first performed. The character may be partly based on an eccentric, deluded individual who frequented Queen Elizabeth's court, claiming – among other things – to be emperor of the world:

"Armado is a caricature of a half-crazed Spaniard known as 'the fantastical Monarcho' who for many years hung about Elizabeth's court, and was under the delusion that he owned the ships arriving in the port of London."

Charles Boyce, *Shakespeare A to Z*, 1990

Romance in the air

II, i

A royal party has arrived at the king's park: the French princess has come, as planned, on a diplomatic mission on behalf of her father the king. Her retinue includes Lord Boyet and three ladies-in-waiting. Boyet urges the princess to remember the importance of her task, which concerns the fate of the French territory of Aquitaine, part of which is currently held by Navarre. She will need to use all her abundant charisma, Boyet tells her, but the princess is unimpressed by his flattery:

Boyet: Be now as prodigal of all dear grace
As Nature was in making graces dear
When she did starve the general world beside
And prodigally gave them all to you.¹

Princess: Good Lord Boyet, my beauty, though but mean,²
Needs not the painted flourish³ of your praise.
Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye,
Not uttered by base sale of chapmen's tongues.⁴

¹ *be as lavish with your precious charm as Nature was when she bestowed so many attractive qualities on you, making them unavailable to everyone else*

² *only moderate*

³ *superficial adornment*

⁴ *not a commodity offered for sale by merchants*

The first thing that needs to be done, the princess declares, is to establish whether they will be permitted to meet King Ferdinand. News of the king's intention to spend a long period in seclusion, away from female company, has already travelled beyond Navarre:

Princess: Good Boyet,
You are not ignorant all-telling fame
Doth noise abroad¹ Navarre hath made a vow,
Till painful study shall outwear three years,²
No woman may approach his silent³ court.

¹ *you are aware of the news spread around by rumour, which reaches everyone*

² *until he has completed three years of arduous study*

³ *quiet, deep in contemplation*

Accordingly, the princess decides to send Boyet to greet the king and ask whether he is prepared to meet her and her entourage. When Boyet has gone, the princess and her three attendants – Maria, Katherine and Rosaline – discuss the gentlemen who have vowed, along with the king, to shut themselves away for so long.

Maria reports that she has met one of the men, named Longaville, at a wedding party. She praises him highly, and confirms that his reputation as a gallant, handsome courtier is well deserved. His only fault, she suggests, is that he can be a little inconsiderate at times. The princess is sceptical:

Maria: The only soil¹ of his fair virtue's gloss,
If virtue's gloss will stain with any soil,
Is a sharp wit matched with too blunt a will,²
Whose edge hath power to cut, whose will still wills
It should none spare that come within his power.³
Princess: Some merry mocking lord, belike:⁴ is't so?
Maria: They say so most that most his humours know.⁵
Princess: Such short-lived wits do wither as they grow.⁶

¹ *blemish*

² *a keen sense of humour which he is too ready to use, regardless of the circumstances*

³ *his wit can be cutting, and is merciless once it has chosen its victim*

⁴ *no doubt*

⁵ *that's the view of those who best know his character*

⁶ *if his wit is so brilliant, it will soon fade; his appeal won't last*

... a sharp wit matched with too blunt a will ...

The word 'wit' is used more often in *Love's Labour's Lost* than in any other Shakespeare play.