SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF SHAKESPEARE STUDIES AND PRODUCTION

42

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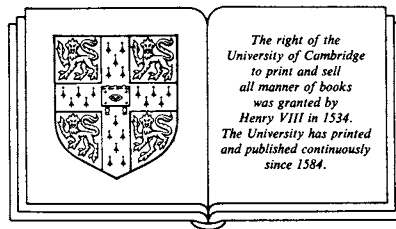
STANLEY WELLS



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'JACK HATH NOT JILL': FAILED COURTSHIP IN LYLY AND SHAKESPEARE

DAVID BEVINGTON

I begin with two perceptions: first, the observation of Robert Y. Turner that English comedy did not really find a successful way to dramatize love in any psychological sense before Lyly began his career as a playwright, and second, that of Alfred Harbage and others that *Love's Labour's Lost* is the most Lylyan of Shakespeare's plays.[1] The Lyly play that immediately invites attention in this regard is *Sappho and Phao*, written in 1584, since, like Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, it ends in a lack of romantic completion for the young lovers.[2] Without wishing to argue that Shakespeare turned directly to *Sappho and Phao* as a kind of source, I should like to ask what we can learn from examining these two plays together. They are both centred on the experience of young men and women as they meet one another for the first time in amorous encounter, and in both plays the experience is a difficult one, evoking in the men sensations of apprehension, curiosity, fascination of course but also diminished self-regard and humiliation, all leading ultimately to a collapse or at least postponement of the negotiations in love. Both plays feature a princess or queen whose independence and regal self-assurance inspire an outspokenness in the women around her that the men find, in varying degrees, threatening.[3]

Shakespeare's ending does to be sure leave open the possibility of a resumption of love relations and even eventual marriage while Lyly's portrayal of wooing ends in separation,

[1] Robert Y. Turner, 'Some Dialogues of Love in Lyly's Comedies', *ELH*, 29 (1962), 276–88; Alfred Harbage, '*Love's Labour's Lost* and the Early Shakespeare', *Philological Quarterly*, 41 (1962), 18–36; G. K. Hunter, *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (London, 1962), pp. 298–349, especially pp. 330–5 and 339–42; T. W. Baldwin, *Shakespere's Five-Act Structure* (Urbana, Illinois, 1947), pp. 618–29; and Louis Adrian Montrose, *'Curious-Knotted Garden': The Form, Themes, and Contexts of Shakespeare's 'Love's Labour's Lost'* (Salzburg, 1977), p. 38.

[2] John Wilders, in 'The Unresolved Conflicts of *Love's Labour's Lost*', *Essays in Criticism*, 27 (1977), 20–33, discusses the irresolutions of Shakespeare's play as compared with Lyly's dramaturgy, though he does not mention *Sappho and Phao*. Blaze Odell Bonazza, *Shakespeare's Early Comedies: A Structural Analysis* (The Hague, 1966), pp. 44–75, compares *Love's Labour's Lost* structurally with *Endymion* and *Gallathea*, citing R. Warwick Bond, ed., *The Complete Works of John Lyly*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1902), vol. 2, pp. 276 and 297. (All quotations from *Sappho and Phao* in this essay are from my forthcoming edition of the play, to be published in the Revels Series; the line references here are to Bond's edition, vol. 2, pp. 369–415.) The *Gallathea* connection, described also by G. K. Hunter, *John Lyly*, p. 340, is pursued in Peter Berek, 'Artifice and Realism in Lyly, Nashe, and *Love's Labor's Lost*', *Studies in English Literature*, 23 (1983), 207–21. Oscar James Campbell, *Studies in Shakespeare, Milton, and Donne*, University of Michigan Publications in Language and Literature, vol. 1 (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1925), pp. 3–45, sees an indebtedness in *Love's Labour's Lost* to *Sappho and Phao* and other Lyly plays in terms of wit and badinage. Barry Thorne, '*Love's Labour's Lost*: The Lyly Gilded', *The Humanities Association Bulletin*, 21 (1970), 32–7, focuses on the debt to *Endymion*.

[3] See Irene Dash, *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York, 1981), pp. 9–30.

but this is only to say, as Mary Beth Rose has argued, that Lyly and Shakespeare are dealing with the 'dualizing, idealizing Petrarchan sensibility' to which both were heir, but that Shakespeare's theatre also postulates a more pragmatic view of marriage in which the greater moral prestige accorded to love and marriage makes eventual resolution more possible.[4] More possible, yes, but my emphasis is on the extent to which Lyly and Shakespeare are alike in dramatizing not so much the success of courtship as its hazards and uncertainties. The comedy in both playwrights is directed chiefly at the sweet, hapless absurdity of the young person (especially the young man) as he postures defensively, seeks advice and precedent, idealizes, and collapses in embarrassment. What he eventually gains is a sobering knowledge of self, but it is a knowledge paradoxically achieved through a process of self-delusion and of being scorned and rejected by the young woman. Part of my argument, then, is that in both plays the male point of view is central to the dramatists' uncomfortable vision of the female as the attractive yet baffling prize that seemingly cannot be attained or controlled. The misogyny implicit in this point of view, marked especially in Lyly, is something of which the dramatist may have been only partially aware.

When we examine *Sappho and Phao* in these terms, focusing on the experience of Phao, we see the story of a young man, a common ferryman, who is at first perfectly content because he desires nothing beyond what he presently has. Venus' gift to him of supreme beauty is paradoxically the beginning of his misfortune, for, although he becomes enormously attractive to the ladies of Sappho's court and eventually to Sappho herself, when he himself falls in love with Sappho he is doomed to realize that she is impossibly above his reach. Of course the play is concerned as well with Sappho's unhappy experience in love, as she confronts the fact of social and political disparity between her and Phao, wrestles with her affections, behaves rather moodily for a time, and eventually gains control of herself. Her triumph over Venus as the new queen of love gives the play its nominally comic ending. Yet the final scene is devoted to Phao, who finally has no choice but to leave Syracuse in bitter disappointment, aware that he has been lifted out of the humble station in which he once found contentment, and that he has no place to go. For all the play's ostensible purpose of flattering Sappho and, by extension, Queen Elizabeth, as the object of her subjects' veneration, *Sappho and Phao* begins and ends as the story of the rejected male.

This encounter of Phao with Sappho, princess of Syracuse, is traditionally seen in the 'old' historicism as a political allegory of the Duc d'Alençon's unsuccessful courtship of Queen Elizabeth in the 1580s.[5] Even if that particular topical application is chronologically impossible and too officious in its implied message to have served Lyly's purposes, on a broader topical level the play is certainly intended as a gracious compliment to Elizabeth, one that stresses (as do *Campaspe*, written earlier in 1584, and *Endymion*, 1588) the noble choice a monarch must often make between personal happiness through love and the higher demands of public office. At the same time, the social discrepancy separating

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[4] Mary Beth Rose, 'Moral Conceptions of Sexual Love in Elizabethan Comedy', *Renaissance Drama*, NS 15 (1984), 1–29, and *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca, New York, 1988), pp. 22ff.

[5] For example, Frederick Gard Fleay, *A Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama*, 2 vols. (London, 1891), vol. 2, p. 40; Bond, ed., *Complete Works of John Lyly*, vol. 2, p. 366; Felix Schelling, *Elizabethan Drama, 1558–1642*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1908), vol. 2, p. 127; Albert Feuillerat, *John Lyly* (Cambridge, 1910), pp. 108–18. See David Bevington, 'John Lyly and Queen Elizabeth: Royal Flattery in *Campaspe* and *Sappho and Phao*', *Renaissance Papers 1966* (1967), 57–67.

the two lovers can be read in terms of a more universal love allegory as well.[6]

It is on this level that I should like to explore a reading of the play I have not seen attempted before, one that examines the disparity in rank as indicative of psychological tensions as well as political and social ones. Here the gap separates the self-abnegating male from his idealized love-object; his idealization is strongly mingled with resentment and even misogyny. The conflict is one in which the male is sure to lose. The subtext that gives the play its peculiar energy is a male sense of betrayal by the goddess and motherly figure whom he finds himself indebted to for his very being. Sappho is, in these terms, not merely an allegory of Queen Elizabeth or even a portrait of womanhood, but even more a male projection of fears of rejection – fears that are abundantly confirmed by the play's ending, and, what is worse, made inevitable and justified by the political and social necessity of Sappho's choice. Sappho may be 'right' to reject Phao, but that fact doesn't make matters any easier for the discomfited male whose only future is to be a useless appendage. (The political and psychological readings come together, of course, if we imagine that Queen Elizabeth's flirtatious ways of holding her courtiers at bay simply exacerbated the dualizing Petrarchan sensibility that was already there in the courtly attitudes of the governing class.)

In *Sappho and Phao*, in these terms, Phao is a young man who has not known love, and whose awakening to sexual curiosity is one of self-abasement because he finds himself in love with a goddesslike creature impossibly above his reach. It is Venus who awakens Phao's sexual curiosity. Sappho's women are of the opinion that Phao has been made 'disdainful' and 'imperious' by his sudden gift of beauty from Venus (1.4.8), but Ismena at least knows that men in love are mere compounds of weakness: 'I cannot but oftentimes smile to myself to hear men call us weak vessels when they prove themselves broken-hearted, us frail when their thoughts cannot hang together, studying with words to flatter and with bribes to allure when we commonly wish their tongues in their purses, they speak so simply, and their offers in their bellies, they do it so peevishly' (1.4.28–33). Mileta readily agrees: 'It is good sport', she says, 'to see them want matter, for then fall they to good manners, having nothing in their mouths but "Sweet mistress", wearing our hands out with courtly kissings when their wits fail in courtly discourses – now ruffling their hairs, now setting their ruffs, then gazing with their eyes, then sighing with a privy wring by the hand, thinking us like to be wooed by signs and ceremonies' (lines 34–40). Phao is himself not yet in love when these things are being said, but if he is like other young males he will be comically absurd in his vacillations between vanity and vulnerability, self-awareness and stuttering incompetence as a wooer. We as spectators to the play can see that Lyly objectivizes the plight of the male to a significant degree by bestowing on women a cutting wit and an ironic sense of what is so discrepant about male behaviour. Because Sappho's ladies are almost choric in their function of analysing male weakness, we are invited to look through their eyes and come to the conclusion that young women understand these matters – and themselves – far better than do males.

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[6] See, for example, Bernard F. Huppé, 'Allegory of Love in Lyly's Court Comedies', *ELH*, 14 (1947), 93–113, and Marco Mincoff, 'Shakespeare and Lyly', *Shakespeare Survey 14* (1961), 15–24. Muriel Bradbrook points out to me that oarsmen on the Thames were often great favourites with court ladies; particular oarsmen were in demand as ferrymen. As George Hunter observes, there may well have been a contemporary class dimension, distantly anticipatory of D. H. Lawrence, in Lyly's portrayal of a mutual attraction between a great lady and a handsome but distinctly lower-class waterman. Compare what Ferdinand says about 'some strong-thighed bargeman' with whom the Duchess, his sister, might engage in 'the shameful act of sin' (John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan, New Mermaids (London, 1964), 2.5.43–6).

When Phao goes to visit the ancient Sibylla for counselling in love, the folly of adding 'to a poor estate a proud heart and to a disdained man a disdaining mind' (2.1.4–5) emphasizes still further the paradox of the divided male sensibility. The Ovidian source of Sibylla's tale about her own seduction, and the no less Ovidian point of view in Sibylla's sardonic advice about the art of wooing, come together in an ironic portrait of male amorousness that is at once self-assured and helplessly ingenuous. Sibylla's age and experience portray her not only as one who has suffered all that men do to women, but as one who personifies the dark mystery that men so desperately seek and fail to know. She is an oracle, offering a key to success, but the formula turns out to be so trite and self-mocking that the young man ends up knowing no more than he did before. Beauty is a flower that must be seized before it fades. Be diligent as a servant in love. Flatter; 'it is unpossible for the brittle metal of women to withstand the flattering attempts of men' (2.4.63–4). Persevere, and choose a time when women are weakest, especially when they have drunk some wine: 'The wooden horse entered Troy when the soldiers were quaffing, and Penelope, forsooth, whom fables make so coy, among the pots wrung her wooers by the fists when she loured on their faces' (lines 77–80). Write love letters. Dress pleasantly but not too 'curiously'. Laugh when she smiles, stand when she stands, dance, play upon any instrument. Be assured that women are coy when they 'would be overcome' (lines 93–4). Ply her with gifts. Be patient, and be secret.

All these hoary formulas from the *Ars Amatoria*, as applicable to the Petrarchan as to the Ovidian wooer, seem to counsel self-assurance. But, as in unsavoury love-advice even today in the advertisements of men's magazines, Sibylla's seeming reassurances only betray the self-evident anxiety of the male looking for the secret to success. The way to the woman's secret place is at once so sure and so unachievable, so easily devalued and so inestimably beyond the man's worth, that Phao can only resolve to end it all: 'Die, Phao, Phao, die . . . the more thou seekest to suppress those mounting affections, they soar the loftier, and the more thou wrestlest with them, the stronger they wax – not unlike unto a ball which, the harder it is thrown against the earth, the higher it boundeth into the air; or our Sicilian stone, which groweth hardest by hammering' (2.4.8–14). This splendid euphuistic sentence depends for its energy on images of the frightening consequences of uncontrolled erection. The divinity of love confronts Phao with the sad perception that he is 'committing idolatry' with that very god whom he has most cause to 'blaspheme' (lines 18–19). Sibylla's wry Ovidian advice captures the ambivalent sense in which she appears to be unlocking feminine mystery and yet is instead mocking the male with a caricature of his own depraved imagination; the advice to the lovelorn male does not really unveil what women know and feel, perhaps, but is instead a self-serving and ludicrous male fantasy of irresistibility with which Phao can temporarily prop up his withered male self-esteem but which the facts of Phao's case too plainly contradict.

The play's strategy in dealing with this bifurcated vision of male anxiety is to objectivize the duality of women to which the male imagination is so prone. That is, *Sappho and Phao* actually presents us with two kinds of women, with Sappho and with her pert, saucy, and flirtatious ladies-in-waiting. This is not to say that these ladies-in-waiting are shown to be promiscuous, but they certainly manifest the feminine wiles that Phao and, I suspect, the male members of Lyly's audience are meant to find daunting: they engage in sharp repartee; reveal through their dreams a range of love fantasies extending through the various permutations of infatuation and surrender, and know how to put men down. Sappho meantime is regal, goddesslike, impossibly above Phao's head. If she too falls

in love and shows human frailty in her passionate moods, if she is in fact enough like Phao for the play to tease us with the possibility of a love that might have succeeded, the love is also presented as unworthy of Sappho and imposed on her by the arbitrary whim of Venus and Cupid.

Setting to one side the political allegory directed at Queen Elizabeth, we can see that Lyly's portrait of Sappho embodies a view of womanly grace too noble for the flawed importunity of male desire. By craving woman, the male (as Lyly represents him) simultaneously devalues her into an attainable though polluted commodity and elevates her into a beatific vision he cannot hope to deserve. Phao's coming of age in *Sappho and Phao* is a process of discovering that he is fallen simply because he is male. His new consciousness of amorous desire brings no euphoria, not even briefly; instead, it brings shame, dissatisfaction with his lot, self-hatred, and most of all resentment towards the sex that has imposed upon him the sense of guilt and failure. His choices at this point are equally unsatisfactory. When he imagines that women (notably Sappho's flirtatious ladies-in-waiting) are fallen like him into sensuality, he is punished by the seeming confirmation that women are carnal and false, with the resulting loss of an idealization of women on which his spiritual life depends. When he concludes at last that some women, or one woman at any rate, are free of his unhappy accusations, he thereupon validates the justice of his own rejection by that woman and his resulting loss of identity. Phao, at the end of the play, is a person without identity: no occupation or determinable rank, no place of residence, no friend or lover. Sappho's triumph over Venus and her ascending the throne as the new goddess of love preserve the image of womanhood from the dark insinuations that have never left Phao's mind, abetted as those insinuations seem to be by Sibylla's riddling revelations, but these achievements on Sappho's part do not carry Phao along to share in the resolution.

This elevation of ideal womanhood and its objectivization in an Eliza figure are achieved, then, at a fearful price for Phao, since he can now find no way to understand his debased imaginings about women other than that they are a product of his male aggressiveness or that women are indeed unknowable. If *Sappho and Phao* appears to portray a happily concluding political world in which matriarchy has taken the place of patriarchy in the best interests of all the courtiers and philosophers who will be nurtured by this wise Elizabethan princess of Syracuse, the consequences for the central male figure of the play are distressing. Phao accepts his fate because he must, but he has lost the contentment he knew as an oarsman, has failed to achieve any definable masculine status, and can look forward to nothing other than a life of banishment, wandering, superfluousness, and absence of role. Phao has become a drone. His impotent anger at women is barely contained within the play's polite formalities of farewell to the audience.

The young men in *Love's Labour's Lost* are conditionally promised a happiness exceeding that of Phao, but in the play itself their misery and comic discomfiture are hardly less acute. *Love's Labour's Lost* is one of Shakespeare's earliest comedies (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is another) in which the young men and women are sharply differentiated in terms of self-knowing and discovery of self through experience. The women know from the start not only who they are but by whom they are being courted. In their first scene onstage, Act 2 Scene 1, Maria, Catherine, and Rosaline answer the Princess's questions about the 'vow-fellows' of the young King of Navarre with a series of crisp *curricula vitae*. Maria, having seen Longueville at a marriage feast in Normandy, knows him to be 'A man of sovereign parts', 'Well fitted in arts, glorious in arms'. She also knows his salient defect: 'a sharp wit matched with too blunt a will' (lines

44–9). The appraisal is balanced, coolly judicious, generous and yet unsentimental. Catherine and Rosaline follow suit with résumés of Dumaine and Biron that combine firsthand observation and awareness of the men's social accomplishments with a somewhat distanced, even ironic perception of the young men's naïveté and need for maturation. Dumaine, for example, is characterized by Catherine as having 'Most power to do most harm, least knowing ill' (line 58).

The ladies know already, though the men apparently do not, which young man is attracted to which lady (and the reverse); the men, conversely, lack self-knowledge and are a potential menace, most of all to themselves. It is very hard to say when the young ladies fall in love, if they ever do; the term is not descriptive, since the ladies have long since appraised the young men and have essentially made their choice. By the play's end they can scarcely be said to have evinced much deeper emotion or loss of control than that with which they began. Meantime we savour the irony that the young men proceed to fall in love, choosing among the eligible ladies as though by their own volition when we know that the women have quietly chosen for them long ago. The young women do not change much as dramatic characters because they are not portrayed as in need of change; the dramatic interest is instead in the men's changing attitudes towards them.

The women are the goal, the prize. For all their self-possessed candour in their first scene, they remain as enigmatic and unknowable as when they first speak. If the form of comedy suggests that their ultimate wish is to secure the young men as lovers and husbands, they never let on to such a wish or betray any ungovernable desire. Essentially complete in themselves, the women remain a mystery.

Meantime the men dramatize in hyperbolical leaps and falls the uncertain trajectories of male encounters with the other sex.[7] Their first response to their own instinctual tugs is to band together as young males and assert the prior necessity of accomplishment in the arts. Sounding a theme to be developed in Shakespeare's Sonnets,[8] they vow to conquer 'cormorant devouring time' by making war against their own affections 'And the huge army of the world's desires' (1.1.1–10). Their unannounced aim is, as Louis Montrose points out, 'to transcend the limits of mortality'[9] through lasting fame and honour. Despite the abstract quality of this talk about time and the world's desires, we soon discover what the real problem is for them: it is sexuality. The stipulation of seeing no women in their three-year term is at once the centrepiece of their resolution and its Achilles' heel. Erotic love is for them symbolic of worldly pleasure of all sorts, and stands opposed not to contemplative withdrawal (despite their resolve to see that the flesh is 'mortified': line 28), but to fame (line 1) and to those accomplishments through which 'Navarre shall be the wonder of the world' (line 12). Like Jack Tanner in Shaw's *Man and*

[7] E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Early Comedies* (New York, 1966), p. 145, speaks of the young men as 'plunging from one crude male immaturity to another'. Hugh Richmond, in *Shakespeare's Sexual Comedy: A Mirror for Lovers* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1971), p. 83, quotes Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* to the effect that American novelists are like the male lovers in *Love's Labour's Lost* in their inability to handle a mature sexual relationship.

[8] Gates K. Agnew, 'Berowne and the Progress of *Love's Labour's Lost*', *Shakespeare Studies*, 4 (1968), 40–72, notes 'an anxious preoccupation with death' in the young men's masochistic self-assertion of a devotion to renown (p. 43). See also Bobbyann Roesen (Anne Barton), '*Love's Labour's Lost*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 4 (1953), 411–26, and Robert G. Hunter, 'The Songs at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*', *Shakespeare Studies*, 7 (1974), 55–64, for whom the battle the young men encounter is one of Carnival and Lent. Ruth Nevo, *Comic Transformations in Shakespeare* (London, 1980), pp. 69–91, appropriately cites Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* (New York, 1973).

[9] Montrose, '*Curious-Knotted Garden*', p. 28.

Superman,[10] these young men see eros as potentially sapping the vital strength men must devote to their careers. They seek male companionship both to reinforce their resolve (admitted by the most self-aware of them, Biron, to be shaky) through safety in numbers, and to provide a better kind of loving companionship, one in which intellect and fondness can be unreservedly mixed. The King's 'forgetting' that they are about to be visited by a delegation of ladies, a prospect that offers the central comic complication and the first demonstration of the frailty of their vows, can be read simply as evidence that the King and his fellows (excepting the more sceptical Biron) have not thought about the sheer practicalities of such an impending visit, but surely it is also the kind of 'forgetting' that Freud talks about; that is, a sign that the young men partly wish that women would go away and that male pursuit of excellence were more simple. With no Eve in the garden of Eden, what might not Adam accomplish in the way of dutiful self-improvement? And Navarre's park is, in many ways, a garden of Eden, a land like that described in *The Winter's Tale* (1.2.67ff) where twinned male lambs frisk in the sun and bleat the one at the other, knowing not the doctrine of ill-doing until temptation is born to them in the shape of young females who are no longer girls.

This ironic view of the young men's professions of seriousness is forced upon us by the comedy of their unselfknowing,[11] but it should not take away entirely from the worth of their project. The young men are viewed as silly not because they want to make something of themselves nor because they are enamoured of learning and the arts, but because they gauge so poorly their own weakness. From the first, they are discomfited by the women. Their embarrassment at having to choose between their oaths and the obligations of hospitality to a princess of the royal blood is, I hope to show, suggestive of a deeper embarrassment, the feeling of male inadequacy before such an exalted and goddesslike creature as a woman. (Here the Princess's rank functions much like that of Sappho in Lyly's play, even if the male's sense of inferiority and inadequacy is conveyed by Shakespeare not through lesser social rank but by inexperience and clumsiness.)

The young men first reveal their inexperience and unselfknowing by their need to ask who the young women are. 'I beseech you a word, what is she in the white?' asks Longueville of Boyet (2.1.197), only to be rewarded with a witticism suggesting a play on lightness and wantonness: 'A woman sometimes, an you saw her in the light'. To the question, 'Pray you, sir, whose daughter?', Longueville is playfully informed, 'Her mother's, I have heard' (lines 201–2). The answer suggests that the object of Longueville's curiosity is, to borrow Don Armado's phrase, 'a child of our grandmother Eve' (1.1.255). When Biron asks if the lady 'in the cap' – Rosaline – is wedded, he is informed that she is wedded 'To her will' (2.1.211–12). The questions the men ask, and the features by which they distinguish one woman from another, suggest a kind of vulnerability and reliance on surface appearances. Young men who know only that young ladies are their mothers' wilful daughters and that they can be distinguished by a white dress or cap know very little about the inner person, and are ripe targets for a satirical plot in which they will mistake their lovers' identities by means of an easily exchanged diamond, pearl necklace, pair of gloves, or other such 'favours' or outward tokens. Anyone who loves through the eyes is justly punished by the eyes' deception.

[10] For the analogy to Shaw, see Catherine M. McLay, 'The Dialogue of Spring and Winter: A Key to the Unity of *Love's Labour's Lost*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 18 (1967), 119–27; p. 122.

[11] See Rolf Soellner, '*Love's Labour's Lost*: Seeking Oneself', in *Shakespeare's Patterns of Self-Knowledge* (Columbus, Ohio, 1972), pp. 78–96.

The young men's attitude towards the women is at once aggressive and anxious. Boyet describes their preparations for meeting the ladies in the metaphors of military adventurism – 'I was as willing to grapple as he was to board', he says of Biron (2.1.218) – but also reverses the usual male ascendancy in the warfare of the sexes by describing the men as under siege: the King, says Boyet, is lodging the Princess in the field 'Like one that comes here to besiege his court' (line 86).

The image of woman as besieger is only the beginning of what the men find so dismaying. When Biron begins to discover that he is in love, he realizes that he is putting himself at the mercy of an enemy whose most dangerous weapon is that she cannot be controlled by him. A woman, Biron jests painfully, is like a German clock, 'Still a-repairing, ever out of frame, / And never going aright, being a watch, / But being watched that it may still go right' (3.1.186–8). The reason that a man must try to keep a woman under surveillance is that she will prove faithless to him at the slightest opportunity, and indeed is so gifted at deception that the man's watchfulness will be of no avail: she is 'one that will do the deed / Though Argus were her eunuch and her guard' (lines 193–4). She is a 'whitely wanton', a pure-seeming slut, whose 'velvet brow' and 'two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes' (lines 191–2) suggest a carnal nature like that of the Dark Lady of the Sonnets. Much of the jesting among the men about the women whom they now admire has to do with complexion, especially the dark complexion of Rosaline.

To love a lady, according to this view, is to enslave oneself to a creature who seeks domination over the male and whose ultimate weapon is the threat of shameful betrayal through cuckoldry. Boyet asks rhetorically, 'Do not curst wives hold that self-sovereignty / Only for praise' sake when they strive to be / Lords o'er their lords?' (4.1.36–8). When the Princess turns huntress of the deer, the joking about the deers' horns makes the point that another kind of horn will not be in short supply if any of these ladies marry (lines 110–11). We sense that the threat of cuckoldry is not very real in this play, of course, any more than in *The Merchant of Venice* or *As You Like It*, where the heroines similarly jest about woman's infidelity, but that does not lessen the pointedness of the wit about this potential source of feminine power. Romantic women in Shakespeare who have no real intention of cheating on their men are not averse to reminding those men of the options available to women. The bawdry of pricks and rubbing and 'cleaving the pin' in this same scene (lines 131–5) extends the image of the Amazonian huntress and her unequal power in the battle of the sexes. That foolhardy man who takes aim at the woman, in a phallic image of male aggression, will find that he has met his match; as an intrepid bowman aiming at the feminine anatomy he 'must shoot nearer, or he'll ne'er hit the clout' (line 132). The male's attempt to prove his masculinity in sexual conquest is destined to be greeted by the jeering of his intended target:

> Thou canst not hit it, hit it, hit it,
> Thou canst not hit it, my good man

and the even more threatening consequences of his own sexual inadequacy:

> An I cannot, cannot, cannot,
> An I cannot, another can. (lines 124–7)

The men are driven into love, then, by a desire that at once makes them anxious. They devalue the women with whom they are infatuated by speaking of them as debased beauties wielding the power to cuckold men. This sexual anxiety by which the men are driven manifests itself in one of the play's most bizarre images: a street paved with male eyes on which women tread with their dainty feet. It is Biron who introduces the metaphor: 'O, if the streets were pavèd with thine eyes', he tells Longueville, 'Her feet were much too dainty for such tread'. Dumaine cannot resist the

prurient consequences of Biron's fanciful image: 'O vile! Then as she goes, what upward lies / The street should see as she walked overhead' (4.3.278–9). Together, as Tom Greene has noted,[12] the men construct a voyeuristic fantasy in which their eyes, trodden on for their presumption (and *tread* is often a sexual verb in Shakespeare, describing the copulation of fowl), look upward to catch a glimpse of the forbidden woman's part. 'O vile!' Is it the voyeuristic image itself that is vile, or the male imagination that presumes so; or is it the thing they would see and yet punish themselves for desiring?

Accordingly, the scene in which the young men expose one another's perjuries in love is a paradoxical one of shame and release.[13] They are bound by feelings of shame to deplore their own sexual longings, and hang on to the exclusively male credo of their academy as support for their failing resolve. What we today call peer pressure seems to forbid an interest in the opposite sex, as it does also with Mercutio and his friends in *Romeo and Juliet*. Yet the undeniable feeling of relief also becomes a part of the young men's experience of being caught out as lovers. If one's peers are also in love, then one is free to make a fool of oneself; the ribbing one takes is tolerable so long as one can find safety and precedent in numbers. Biron is of course the last to be caught out, the one who comes nearest to being able to maintain his pose of moral superiority – a pose that he would be able to maintain only at the huge cost of having to continue in that role of censor and hypocrite. Once he too is released, he becomes the new spokesman for a companionship in service to love.

> Sweet lords, sweet lovers! – O, let us embrace.
> As true we are as flesh and blood can be.
> The sea will ebb and flow, heaven show his face.
> Young blood doth not obey an old decree.
> We cannot cross the cause why we were born,
> Therefore of all hands must we be forsworn.
> (lines 212–17)

And at this point Biron becomes the leader in a new competition, one that seems ineffably male: that of boasting about one's woman, of competing not only for her but offering her in competition with the women of one's friends. This motif of parading a woman's virtue leads to such disaster in *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Cymbeline*, and elsewhere in Shakespeare, and betrays such a host of masculine and patriarchal obsessions – possessiveness, the need to affirm one's masculinity by insisting on the woman's chastity, and the like – that we are hardly surprised to discover in this instance that trouble is looming for the men. Male bonding and peer pressure, used before to validate a rejection of eros, now serve the cause of competition to see who can be more amorous. The men preen themselves on having overcome their scruples and, in a series of aggressively male metaphors, make plain that they assume conquest to be a simple matter. 'Advance your standards, and upon them, lords. / Pell-mell, down with them; but be first advised / In conflict that you get the sun of them' (lines 343–5). The hard thing is to have overcome one's own reticence and anxiety; once the male offers himself as the desired prize to the grateful woman, victory is a matter of course.

The play's famous 'unfinished' ending is thus expressive in part of prolonged male reluctance, but it is even more suggestive of the comeuppance men deserve for their fatuous assumption that the final conquest will be easy once they have overcome their own reserve.[14] These young men still know the women scarcely at all, and thereby deliver into

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[12] Thomas M. Greene, '*Love's Labour's Lost*: The Grace of Society', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 22 (1971), 315–28; p. 320.

[13] C. L. Barber, in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959), p. 89, speaks tellingly of 'the folly of release taking over from the folly of resistance'.

[14] Greene, '*Love's Labour's Lost*: The Grace of Society', p. 324, speaks of the young lords' comic punishments as a 'final prodding toward maturation'.