

# *"A mint of phrases in his brain"*

## Language, Historiography, and The Authorship Question in *Love's Labour's Lost*

by Julie Harper Elb

Often regarded as the weakest of Shakespeare's plays, *Love's Labour's Lost* has long provoked discord among scholars, eluding a unified opinion. Samuel Johnson labelled it "entangled and obscure" but also "genius," and the play has even been branded as "the darling of the Shakespearean lunatic fringe."<sup>1</sup> The plot is thin, the characters undeveloped, and the source unknown or at least uncertain. Vilification of it began as early as the seventeenth century, and this trend became so influential in Shakespeare studies that it has been nearly impossible to shift. Critics have often repeated Johnson's judgment that it is "mean, childish, and vulgar."<sup>2</sup> Yet in the last few decades *LLL* has slowly gained defenders who argue that those who maligned it neither understood nor appreciated its rich and vivid language. Even after deriding the play, Samuel Johnson admitted that it contained "many sparks of genius" and even more crucially, that no play "has more evident marks of the hand of Shakespeare."<sup>3</sup> John Pendergast, the modern critic, took Johnson's idea a step further, suggesting that the sheer joyous vitality of the language "taps into an energy of the time in a way no other play does."<sup>4</sup>

The negative appraisal from seventeenth-century critics forged a persuasive and even pernicious historiography that not only prejudiced subsequent opinions of the play but also confused and clouded serious theories about the dates of composition and possible sources. This uncertainty created a situation where critics like G.R. Hibbard have essentially fabricated biographical evidence about the author in order to preserve the long-standing opinion that the play is opaque and abstruse, weak in plot and unintelligible in verse. Many of these difficulties can be resolved if we re-consider the language of the play, strip it of its damaging historiography, and re-interpret the text without trying to force it to fit the biography of Shakespeare of Stratford. In fact, a simpler, more plausible and ultimately more satisfactory interpretation of the play emerges if we consider Edward de Vere as the text's author.

*Love's Labour's Lost* has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years. It has been performed more frequently, turned into an opera by Nicholas Nabokov, and filmed by Kenneth Branagh in a truncated musical version where sonnets and monologues are replaced by Busby Berkeley-style musical numbers. Traditional scholarship has been slow to catch up to increased interest, and the play is still rarely taught in Shakespeare classes, despite the uncomplicated plot. Based loosely on the court of Henri IV of France, *LLL* follows the king, Navarre in the play, and his three attending lords who formally

swear off the company of women as well as other distracting indulgences in order to devote themselves to an arduous three years of study. When the Princess of France visits on behalf of her father with, conveniently, three attending ladies, the men begin to fall violently in love. One by one, they break the promises they made to study, instead composing sonnets and devising entertainments to woo these ladies, all the while trying to soothe their own and each other's consciences for their perjury.

This minimal plot has caused many critics, Hibbard among them, to categorize the play as one of Shakespeare's earliest works, perhaps even his very first effort, assuming that the Bard could have penned something so deficient only if he had been young and untrained, a fledgling writer on the London scene. Other critics justify their aversion to the play by clinging to Samuel Johnson's early opinion about its vulgarity. Johnson suggested, as a seventeenth-century Anglican moralist, that the play's earthier passages were unfit for an audience that included their "maiden queen."<sup>5</sup>

*Love's Labour's Lost* is also unusual for its ending, atypical for a Shakespearean comedy, since the four couples have an ambiguous future and do not end the play married or betrothed. A celebratory Pageant of the Nine Worthies, a play-within-a-play in the final scene, is interrupted with the grave news that the Princess's father has died, making her the new queen. The four couples are thus separated for a year and a day, the men promising to renew their courtship of the women at the end of that time, when the ladies' period of mourning is over. As Berowne says, "Our wooing doth not end like an old play/Jack hath not Jill."<sup>6</sup> It is left to the audience to determine if the couples reunite in the future, knowing that the men have already "play'd foul play" once with their oaths, as Berowne reminds us. This refreshingly real ending has also caused irritation among early critics who viewed it as a mark of Shakespeare's immaturity as a writer. Lewis Theobald wrote in 1733, "I think, that tho' he has more frequently transgress'd the Unity of Time by cramming Years into the Compass of a Play, yet he knew the Absurdity of so doing, and was not unacquainted with the Rule to the contrary."<sup>7</sup> Theobald at least had confidence that the author was deliberate in his intentions, but other scholars have not been as kind.

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Charles Gildon wrote in 1710 about *Love's Labour's Lost*: "I shall say no more to it but this, that since it is one of the worst of Shakespeare's Plays, nay I think I may say the very worst, I cannot but think that it is his first, notwithstanding those Arguments or that Opinion that has been brought to the contrary..."<sup>8</sup> He also says, and Johnson echoes this opinion later, "But tho' this play be so bad yet there is here and there a Stroak that persuades us that Shakespeare wrote it..."<sup>9</sup> Alexander Pope suggested that instead of the play being Shakespeare's first, that it, along with *The Winter's Tale*, and *Titus Andronicus*, might only be partly penned by him: "only some characters, single scenes, or perhaps a few particular passages were of his hand." Whoever composed the rest of these plays was of little matter, Pope argued, as it was simplest just to attribute them to Shakespeare: "They give Strays to the Lord of the Manor," he said, implying that Shakespeare's reputation as the finest author in the English language could endure the attribution of an inferior play or two.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that as early as the eighteenth century there are questions about the authorship of this play.

Theobald concluded in 1733 that there was not sufficient reason to doubt the play was of Shakespeare's hand although he might have written it "in his boyish Age." Yet still he complained, "there are some Scenes (particularly in this Play) so very mean and contemptible that One would heartily wish for the Liberty of Expunging them."<sup>11</sup>

Hibbard and other modern critics have been infected with the harsh seveneenth-century attitude that *Love's Labour's Lost* was the product of an untested youth, a poorly-written play whose sheer delight in linguistic gymnastics was regarded as dense, impenetrable and opaque when staged one hundred and forty years later. Early twentieth-century opinion was equally severe: H.C. Hart, in 1906 wrote, "But the play taken as a whole, with all allowance for revision, is obviously a very immature production."<sup>12</sup>

This pattern has had a disastrous effect, for the view that *LLL* is badly written has caused scholars to ignore what some are slowly coming to realize – that the play is entirely consumed with language: a heady mixture of witty dialogue, idioms, sonnets, couplets, verse, blank verse, puns, insults, and satirical wordplay, set in silly scenes of mistaken identity but pointing to the overarching serious matter of broken promises. As John Pendergast has commented, "the verse in the play represents some of Shakespeare's most ornate and self-conscious writing."<sup>13</sup> Readers have been too easily misled by earlier opinions, and have not allowed the text to speak for itself. Perplexity over the verbal jousting steers readers towards the erroneous conclusion that the play must have been composed by a novice writer flexing new muscles, a mysterious beginner who would later miraculously acquire the facility to pen the more impressive *Hamlet* or *Othello*. This insistence that the play is a failed effort of Shakespeare's youth, an anomaly among his other great works, has forced an interpretation onto

the play rather than letting the individuality of the text shine as a rare, unique and exceptional insight into the canon.

Unlike most Shakespearean plays, *Love's Labour's Lost* has no known historical or literary source, or at least not one that matches the standard chronology of Shakespeare's life. This absence has led scholars to find or invent sources in order to preserve the opinion that it is one of the first of his plays to be written. The negative seventeenth-century criticism guarantees the verdict that the play was composed very early in Shakespeare's London career. The figures in the play, however, are historical. The men of *LLL*, the king of Navarre, Berowne, and others are all identifiable members of Henri IV's court. The French ambassador de la Mothe Fenelon is likely the inspiration for the character of Moth, the small, irreverent page of the fantastical Spaniard, Don Armado. Armado's name refers the reader to current events as the 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada was a major victory in the English psyche.

Although the earliest surviving quarto dates from 1598, no first quarto has surfaced, so scholars almost universally guess at a composition date of 1594 or 95, oddly placing it after the more popular and appreciated *The Taming of the Shrew* and just before the serious melodrama of *Romeo and Juliet*, but there is no historical validity for this decision. Alfred Hart suggested, perhaps because of the character of Armado, a composition date of 1588 which indeed would put it as a very youthful play of Shakespeare, written when he was 23 or 24, even before his fame-making long poems of "Venus and Adonis" and "Lucrece."<sup>14</sup> H.C. Hart settled on 1590, stating boldly: "I conclude then that the first cast of *LLL* was Shakespeare's first genuine play."<sup>15</sup> Traditional chronology suggests that the outbreak of the Plague, which closed theatres from August of 1592 to the spring of 1594 forced Shakespeare into the poetry-writing business, yet scholars suggest he might have written up to five plays also during this time. Pendergast has pointed out the flaw in this reasoning, arguing that this early dating scheme is "a conclusion erroneously based on an assumption that [the play's] exuberance and unique dramatic development must suggest a young playwright."<sup>16</sup> In other words, scholars have allowed the belief that *LLL* is a bad play to precede attempts to date it, fixing it on a spot along a chronology invented from the sparse information that exists about Shakespeare's life.

Controversial theories about possible sources for the play have also led scholars to confirm the date of composition as the mid-1590s. One such theory revolves around the final act of *LLL*. Navarre and his lords, having sent favors to the ladies ahead of time, partake in a bizarre masque where they disguise themselves as Russians to court the ladies, who have switched favors beforehand so that each man woos the wrong woman. In a striking example of forcing the history to fit the timeline of the man from Stratford, Rupert Taylor suggested that 1595 or 96 must be the composition date for the play because of the famous holiday revels at Gray's Inn in 1594. In that year, the revels included a Masque of Russians, so scholars have concluded

that the Masque served either as Shakespeare's direct source for the play or at least provided him with the general idea for disguising his young men as Muscovites. On Twelfth Night of that Christmas season at Gray's Inn an "Ambassador" of Russia also came to entertain, lending even more circumstantial credibility to the theory that Shakespeare used the Gray's Inn Revels as a source for his play, therefore it could not have been composed before December of 1594.

Ruth Loyd Miller, in her 2006 article for *The Oxfordian*, argues that the play references Queen Elizabeth's 1578 progress through her eastern counties, which, if true, opens the work to a much earlier period for composition, making it less likely that Shakespeare of Stratford composed it. Miller's most persuasive point is that the Masque of Russians in *LLL* must be a parody of the Russian ambassador's visit to England in 1582, when he was sent by Ivan the Terrible to evaluate Lady Mary Hastings as his potential bride. Queen Elizabeth had not given her consent to this marriage and delayed for months until Lady Mary finally refused Ivan, much to his anger. This Russian contretemps was an infamous event at the English court, one of deliberate misunderstandings, miscommunications, and outright taunting of the Russian contingent, much like what is reflected in the play. There is even the suggestion that poor Lady Mary, to her horror, was said to have been known afterwards in court as "The Empress of Muscovia."<sup>17</sup> If Miller's argument is correct, the presence of these bumbling Russians in the play is a clever in-joke between the author and the Queen and her court, a work couched in very deliberate references and wordplay that would later seem cryptic and obscure when the original event was forgotten.<sup>18</sup>

Both Taylor and Miller assume the author knew that his audience would be amused by a Masque of Russians, a supposition inconsistent with the idea that Shakespeare wrote the play soon after arriving in London. How did he acquire enough knowledge? Did he simply choose, perhaps based on gossip, to parody Russians and hit an unlikely jackpot? Critics have scoffed at or entirely ignored the idea that the Russian visit could have been a likely source for the play because Shakespeare would have been at most eighteen, about to be married in Stratford. Critics like Taylor have forced their commentary to match the existing biography, suggesting instead that Shakespeare at some point moved to London, became a highly regarded actor and playwright and somehow attained enough intimate knowledge of the court to pen a play as sophisticated and erudite as *Love's Labour's Lost*.

This fabrication of facts to support the traditional dating scheme goes to the heart of the problem with accepting William of Stratford as Shakespeare. G.R. Hibbard assumes that Shakespeare's inexperience caused him to invent flimsy characters while the play was already in rehearsal, penning scenes and characters on the fly, as a young writer might because he saw a better way to use the actors at hand. Hibbard's argument is that the author improvised as required, changing his mind mid-play about a character's role.<sup>19</sup> Hibbard suggests that Shakespeare was particularly changeable

about the role of Armado, even going so far as to argue that if Shakespeare took a role for this play, “as seems quite likely in the early performances of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, it should have been that of Armado.”<sup>20</sup> Hibbard’s subsequent interpretation of the play is based partly on this biographical creation. If he is correct, and Shakespeare did change course mid-way through composition, why not revise it for the 1598 Folio as it claims to be “newly corrected and augmented?”<sup>21</sup> The more pressing inconsistency is that Hibbard assumes that the playwright, because of his youth, barely knew what he was doing and was fumbling through a play concocting scenes as he went along. If that is the case, and Shakespeare was new to London, fresh from the provinces and not even a competent writer yet, how did he manage to have such intimate knowledge of the French court, its recent history, and more importantly, the refined and sophisticated language used at the English court?

Like *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have no known, confirmed sources, yet few scholars group the three plays together since *Midsummer* has become a beloved icon and *Tempest* belongs so categorically to Shakespeare’s mature works, a play written seventeen years after *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, if the Stratfordian chronology can be believed.<sup>22</sup> Yet all three have masques or plays-within-plays, each interrupted dramatically. One wonders if these plays are all original plots with no source material and if so, might the author be recycling the same idea over and over.<sup>23</sup>

Hibbard dismisses the two masques in *LLL*, just as he does characters he thinks Shakespeare improvised, arguing that the masques were not deliberate or intentional but rather “bits of improvisation on the part of the playwright.”<sup>24</sup> Because the Masque of Muscovites and the closing Pageant of the Nine Worthies both appear in the final act with no earlier hints of what is to come, Hibbard argues that these two scenes in particular are just “afterthoughts.”<sup>25</sup> Few would dare make this same argument about similar scenes in *The Tempest* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or make the bold claim that they “invite one to look over Shakespeare’s shoulder . . . [and] watch him in the act of composition.”<sup>26</sup> Hibbard never mentions that the Pageant of the Nine Worthies could be, as William Farina suggested, “descended from a device with the same title that was arranged by Thomas Churchyard and performed before the queen in 1578.”<sup>27</sup> In ignoring this potential source, because it does not fit the dates of Shakespeare’s life in London, Hibbard must assume that Shakespeare is composing off-the-cuff, creating makeshift scenes, making mistakes as a neophyte writer, eventually producing an ill-planned and badly-written play.

The dating of *LLL* to the mid-1590s makes commentators assume that it is flawed because it is a product of Shakespeare’s youth. As such, it cannot be ranked alongside his other acclaimed works, even though the same argument does not hold for *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Taming of the Shrew*, which are often placed in the same time period and are less linguistically complex. In a circular argument where scholars

highlight flaws of character and plot and therefore declare the play one of Shakespeare's earliest, they subsequently assume that because of the early date, the play must be fraught with these problems, thus they search for the supposed defects and inconsistencies they expect to find.<sup>28</sup> The real paradox, however, is that these same scholars who accuse the author of clumsy composition never question how he writes of his subject matter so assuredly. Even as a new arrival to London, the author writes confidently about court habits and mores, yet critics suggest he was only just able to construct this barely passable play. How does the author write so naturally of court life, as if courtiers are his equals? How does he write the characters of Navarre and Berowne, mimicking their language appropriately? How is he able to inhabit so convincingly the very voice of nobility?

What if *Love's Labour's Lost* were written even earlier than most critics believe, not by a newcomer with no connections to London, but a mature man of court, one singularly honored by his literary contemporaries? The Earl of Oxford had a complicated history at the English court, falling in and out of favor with Elizabeth over the years, but he had a gift for performing, for fiery speaking and writing, and acted as patron for more than one troupe of actors, leasing at least two theatrical companies in the 1590s. More importantly for this play, Oxford spoke and read fluent French, thereby having access to at least one of the early possible sources for *LLL*, Francois de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*, before it was translated into English. We know Oxford was a courtier to whom King Henri VI had written, that he had travelled in France, and that he must have known the French Ambassador, de la Mothe Fenelon, who was at the English court at the time of Oxford's wedding. These incidents seem too many to be coincidental but if, as some contend, the play is Shakespeare's first effort, or even an early effort, can it really be, as Pendergast has argued, "an extended poetic meditation on the power and limitations of language?"<sup>29</sup> As Farina has written, "If Will Shakespeare was the true author, then we can only assume that he was given a unique and specific opportunity to entertain his betters, to which he responded miraculously, to say the least."<sup>30</sup>

Many scholars are familiar with the numerous contemporary references lauding Oxford's literary abilities. Henry Peacham's famous 1622 list of writers "whose like are hardly to be hoped for, in any succeeding Age" mentions first the Earl of Oxford and nowhere does it list the prolific Shakespeare.<sup>31</sup> In his dedicatory sonnets to *The Faerie Queen*, Edmund Spenser offers the customary obsequious compliments to his patrons, noting their bravery, heroism, honor, worthiness, and in the case of the ladies, their beauty. He praises the Lord Chancellor Sir Christopher Hatton's wise counsel and Lord Charles Howard's defeat of the Armada. But he singles out Oxford for a different kind of tribute, extolling Oxford's love for the "Heliconian ymps" and their adoration of him in return, he and they being "most deare" to one another. He also, as one would expect in a sonnet of praise, alludes to Oxford's noble ancestry, but refers to it as shielded by a "shady vele," under which Oxford himself will

be remembered, the veil a popular allegorical reference for things concealed from those not yet ready to see. Christopher Burlinson writes of a veil “as central to early modern allegorical theory....Here it implies not only a shielding of the allegory from eyes that are not prepared to read it, but also a gap between image and meaning.” Although Burlinson makes no connection between Spenser’s cryptic comment and Shakespeare, it is certainly possible that Spenser’s oblique reference could suggest that he knows of Oxford’s role as playwright and cheekily insinuates that a veil is drawn too over Oxford’s “owne long living memory.” It is unusual language indeed as Spenser bemoans the future of literature, thinking the great age is already past.<sup>32</sup>

Like Spenser, numerous other Elizabethan poets and dramatists dedicated works to Oxford, far too many fulsome tributes for the meagre body of poetry attributed to him.<sup>33</sup> Oxford was at court during the farcical Russian delegation of 1582, a more satisfying connection to the source of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* than the Gray’s Inn Revels, since we have no proof that Shakespeare attended them, was invited, or was even in London during that year. If Oxford is the author, his Russian jokes in the play are bold references that Queen Elizabeth and the entire court would have understood immediately. If the Pageant of the Nine Worthies were drawn from Thomas Churchyard’s pageant of 1578 (back to that year again of Elizabeth’s progress), it would be another wistful trip down memory lane for the audience. There is also the compelling fact that “Churchyard had a long personal and literary association with de Vere lasting over thirty years.”<sup>34</sup> And yet, Stratfordian scholars prefer to believe that Shakespeare is improvising rather than admit that a potential source for the play could come from a man so intimately known to Oxford.

Another reference to Elizabeth’s past is highlighted in the play, making it difficult to imagine a commoner penning it: early in Act Two, when the Princess of France asks her ladies for gossip about the King and his attending lords, Katherine says of the Lord Dumaine, “I saw him at the Duke Alençon’s once.” One can imagine that this impudent line had deeper meaning for the audience, for the Duke of Alençon, almost half the Queen’s age, was once her suitor. It was a match which Oxford reportedly favored, although he likely suspected it was a charade on the Queen’s part, as indeed it turned out to be. In fact, when that French delegation visited Elizabeth’s court on behalf of the Duke, Oxford and Philip Sidney had their infamous public dispute on a tennis court in front of all the members of the French deputation.<sup>35</sup> It was a memorable enough event for Spenser to parody it later.<sup>36</sup> So the reference to the Duke is more than just a reference to the Queen’s suitor – it is possibly a reference to Oxford himself.

Elizabeth was reportedly so moved when she broke off the engagement to the Duke in 1581 that she composed the poem *On Monsieur’s Departure*, a short meditation on the suppression of her feelings because of her obligations as sovereign. In the second stanza, she writes, “No means I find to rid him from my breast,” a sentiment



echoed in the last act of *LLL* when Navarre tells the departing Princess of France, “Hence ever then my heart is in thy breast.” In *LLL*, it is the woman who leaves behind her lover in order to embrace duty, and the man who stays behind to cope with his lingering feelings. Surely, this was a satisfying reversal for Elizabeth, a play on her own words. Even the ambiguous ending of *LLL* could be a reference to the Queen’s life, with no wedding and no promise that one will occur. A shared history between the Queen and Oxford makes it more likely that Oxford composed the play, for how could the neophyte from Stratford have dared to borrow Elizabeth’s own phrasing much less remind her of a bittersweet relationship?

The rarified and obscure court atmosphere would certainly have been difficult for Shakespeare to understand, particularly as he would have been a lad of sixteen or so when Elizabeth ended her association with the Duke. Although Shakespeare could have been told stories of court and the Queen’s suitors, would he have been daring enough to allude to events that held great emotional significance for her? Felicia Londré emphasizes this point that most scholars have ignored: “How would a young man fresh from a small rural town have dared to write one of his first plays for and about court society?”<sup>37</sup> She continues, arguing against the many scholars who think that the play was a parody of the flowery, ornate style of English prose, the fleeting fad of euphuism: “In fact, how could one who spoke Warwickshire dialect have acquired the verbal facility and sophistication to lampoon a linguistic fad that had flared briefly among courtiers when he was only fourteen?”<sup>38</sup>

Bardoloters have long used this paradox as proof of Shakespeare’s “genius,” but as Joseph Sobran writes, genius is not a sufficient or satisfactory answer: “*A Streetcar Named Desire* may not be as great a play as *Hamlet*, but the author of *Hamlet* couldn’t have written it and Tennessee Williams could. This is a matter not of genius but of individuality.”<sup>39</sup> In defending Shakespeare’s extraordinary ability to write about his superiors, critics cite biographical certainties for which there is no historical evidence: Hibbard, for example, argues that for this play especially there must be reasons for Shakespeare’s flawless use of legal terms and military language, including the ease with which he moves between cultivated and idiomatic speech. Hibbard asserts confidently that Shakespeare had regular contact with men at the Inns of Court, or was perhaps even employed as a clerk.

*LLL* in particular attracts critics who use the language of the play selectively to suit their case, but ignore the language when it does not. Like Hibbard, they argue that Shakespeare’s accurate use of legal terms means he must have known men of law, but the fact that he can write with the voice of an insider at court simply means he was a genius. The critics are correct that the legal terms in Shakespeare’s plays are significant, but they argue for the wrong reasons, ignoring the fact that many of these unusual words also appear in letters penned by the Earl of Oxford. The list of these words in *LLL* alone is lengthy: acquittances (a word appearing only in this

play and nowhere else in the canon), attainer, nominate, petitioner, precedent, tales, testimony, cause, charge, debt, grant, lawful, pardon, parties, receipt, recompense, seal, statutes, suit, sum, title, treason, and witness. The first few words are rare, even within the canon: attainer appears in only three other plays, all in legal contexts, while nominate and petitioner appear in only a handful of other plays. To build on Londré's argument, how did Shakespeare come by them, and so very early in his career? Even Alfred Hart, who praised the play's linguistic originality still sided with pejorative opinion, dismissing the inventiveness of the author by arguing that "great length and a large vocabulary do not necessarily carry with them high dramatic quality; [a] comparison of . . . *Love's Labour's Lost* and *As You Like It* . . . enforces the truth of such an obvious statement."<sup>40</sup> Again, in the traditional view, *LLL* is dismissed as a bad play, a one-off in Shakespeare's career, oddly sandwiched between his much worthier efforts of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

This issue of Shakespeare's facility with language is certainly an arresting one, especially for the play in question whose substance is driven by language itself. Shakespeare was, after all, known as a poet before he was acknowledged as a playwright.<sup>41</sup> Given that the playful but poetic dialogue of *LLL* is so unique, critics seem unable to resist analyzing it, even while disparaging it, searching for clues about the author's life. But in their conclusions they prove that they have been influenced by the historically negative opinions of the play. Hibbard complains that there could have been "less obscurity in fewer words," a charge levelled at *LLL* and few other plays.<sup>42</sup> On the subject of the play's wordiness, Hibbard notes that it "contains, as Alfred Hart showed more than forty years ago, a larger number of new words – new in the sense that Shakespeare had not used them before – than any other play, with the single exception of *Hamlet* . . . and *Hamlet*, it has to be remembered, is nearly half as long again as the comedy."<sup>43</sup> What is the reader to make of this feature that Shakespeare's supposedly worst play shares with his best?

The author of *LLL* emphasizes over and over again the importance of language, its newness, and its excesses, not just in the legalese mentioned above, but in the very rhetoric of his characters. Navarre sets the scene early in Act One by ridiculing Armado's pompous use of language, saying:

That he hath a mint of phrases in his brain;  
 one whom the music of his own tongue  
 Doth ravish like enchanting harmony.  
 (1, 1, 164-166)

This "mint of phrases" is not only a sign of the subject matter of the play about to unfold, but it may also explain why Hibbard suggests that Shakespeare himself played the role of Armado. Hibbard assumes that Armado, a veritable font of linguistic originality, was a character close to the author's heart, maybe even a reflection

of the author himself. Or perhaps because Armado is given the final lines in the play, Hibbard thinks Shakespeare reserved these last words for himself as an actor, but the supposition that Shakespeare played Armado is one for which there is not a shred of evidence. What Hibbard ignores is that the author, through Navarre, is parodying Armado's ability with language, suggesting that his loquaciousness is not one of ease and proficiency but rather one of ineptness and even impotence. How would a young author, surely trying to be accepted as a serious contender by the literary elite, have the confidence to parody linguistic convention so brazenly? Would he be willing to mock himself so readily by playing such a ridiculous character onstage? And in his first play?

As pointed out above, the vocabulary between Oxford and Shakespeare, if indeed they are two different men, is astonishingly alike, and both owe a vast debt to Ovid, particularly evident in this play.<sup>44</sup> Joseph Sobran has already paralleled the distinctive phrasing of Oxford's letters and known poems with Shakespeare's plays.<sup>45</sup> For *LLL* in particular, Sobran examines Oxford's popular poem "In Praise of a Contented Mind" and lifts out two phrases: "he do pine and die" and "no princely pomp, no wealthy store." He suggests these particular words are more than just similar to Dumaine's oath where he proclaims, "To love, to wealth, to pomp, I pine and die."<sup>46</sup> I suggest that the word pine is particularly significant in this play, for Longaville too uses it in his oath, declaiming eloquently that "The mind shall banquet, though the body pine." Oxford uses the word again in his poem, "If Care or Skill could Conquer Vain Desire," ending with the phrase, "though he do pine and die," demonstrating that Oxford repeated both vocabulary and phrasing from one work to another.<sup>47</sup>

This same poem shows other linguistic similarities to *LLL* in the distinct phrase, "what worldly wight can hope for heavenly hire" which is echoed in Berowne's "These earthly godfathers of heaven's lights," and then mirrored again in the phrase "that sings heaven's praise with such an earthly tongue" (read by Sir Nathaniel, but the line is Berowne's). Longaville imitates the same sentiment when he says, "My vow was earthly, thou a heavenly love."<sup>48</sup> Sobran also suggests that Costard's cheeky line "Truth is truth" that he speaks to the Princess is much like a letter of Oxford's where he writes, "For truth is truth though never so old." It may also be a tongue-in-cheek reference to the de Vere punning motto, *Vero Nihil Verius*, nothing is truer than truth.<sup>49</sup>

This overwhelming similarity between Oxford's known work and the plays is routinely ignored by scholars, partly because they have been conditioned to recognize the garrulity of the play as the unrestrained effort of a young and inexperienced playwright. But what if the historical assumptions are wrong? What if the play is not an early attempt fraught with errors but rather a sophisticated commentary on court life, stuffed with private jokes and personal references that quickly became obscure? To reach this conclusion, the reader must disengage from the over three hundred

years or more of criticism that belittles the play.

The life of Edward de Vere certainly provides the circumstantial proof for which G.R. Hibbard was searching in the life of Shakespeare. Not only was Oxford a military veteran and trained in law, but his Cambridge education provided the linguistic ability to read the sources used in the plays in their original form. The Churchyard text of 1578 and other potential sources used by the author are routinely overlooked because they fit the chronology of Oxford's life, not Shakespeare's. Much of this source material was only available and appropriate to a man of Oxford's age and education. This evidence, including Oxford's relationship with his retainer and fellow-poet Churchyard, has been ignored in favor of inventing biographical "proof" to fit the life of Shakespeare of Stratford. Thus, scholars have allowed improbable theories about Shakespeare's life to trump the testimony readily available from the life of Oxford.

If *LLL* were penned by the Earl of Oxford rather than the man from Stratford, the play becomes not a "childish and vulgar" product of an immature playwright but the creation of an experienced writer, misunderstood for centuries because it was written for an exclusive and elite audience. If written by Oxford, *LLL* ceases to be a strange anomaly within the canon, but becomes instead a poised, confident, even experimental extravagance on the part of a skilled author who, secure in his audience, ignores common plot and character conventions in order to indulge himself in semantics, producing a work teeming with contemporary references.

This cultivated language of the play far better suits the lauded Earl, so eloquently praised by his literary contemporaries, than the rural actor Shakespeare. Attempting to date the play is important, but when scholars prejudice the process by beginning with the assumption that the play is undeveloped or puerile, it becomes difficult to recognize the ripe and mature flavor of the text. Oxford, perhaps in his mid-forties by the time *LLL* is written, would be naturally more adept at writing a play that flouted the usual conventions, composing instead a work motivated and propelled by language.

It is astonishing to think that Shakspeare of Stratford alluded to a suitor of the queen, a dangerous task for anyone, much less a commoner new to London. Could he have been confident enough to borrow her own phrasing and re-make it for his own play? Even more shocking is how adeptly the author satirizes the complex political relationship among England, France, and Spain while effortlessly weaving in relevant legal terms, all the while hinting at events in Elizabeth's past that occurred when he was still a teenager. Leaving aside the issue of how Shakespeare knew enough of court life to make all these references, is the reader meant to believe that a young, untested author used this acquired knowledge in such an unconventional way? Oxford, on the other hand, was not only familiar with but steeped in the conventions, rituals, routines, traditions, and customs of Elizabeth's court in a way Shakespeare

could not be. More importantly, he was immersed in the English *and* French linguistic habits relevant to the play which are exhibited so effortlessly in the text and in the phrasing of his own poems and letters.

Ironically, it may be Samuel Johnson who offers the reader the answer to the riddle of *Love's Labour's Lost*. He suggests that a play like this one, too topical and too trendy, will soon be lost to the ages. He writes:

It is the nature of personal invective to be soon unintelligible; and the author that gratifies private malice – *animam in vulnere ponit* – destroys the future efficacy of his own writings, and sacrifices the esteem of succeeding times to the laughter of a day. It is no wonder, therefore that the sarcasms which, perhaps, in the author's time set the playhouse in a roar, are now lost among general reflections.<sup>50</sup>

To be fair, Johnson was addressing the speculation among prior critics that some of the play's characters are satires of real, identifiable figures. If so, he accuses Shakespeare of almost unconscionable malice, hence his accusation that the play is mean and childish. But his argument about the play's specificity applies as well to the other personal allusions and the setting of *LLL*. Johnson argues, in the Latin phrase, that the author puts his very soul into these wounds, but does he not invest just as much into the play's sonnets, compliments, praise, wit and humor? Would a young and inexperienced writer, wanting to build and enhance his reputation, be capable of writing a work so trenchantly connected to the audience who would see it performed?

If Miller is correct, and the inspiration for *LLL* is Elizabeth's progress of 1578, that event too would soon be forgotten. If the Masque is a reference to Ivan the Terrible's delegation and the Pageant a re-telling of Churchyard, both of these sources would also be relevant for only a short time, out-dated and unintelligible to audiences by the eighteenth century. The references to Elizabeth are so timely and specific that hundreds of years later they would be confusing to Johnson. When Johnson complained that the play was unfit to be shown to Elizabeth, he failed to realize that it was written for her, and even about her.

Alfred Hart, who was not arguing for an author other than the Stratford man, pointed out "about a fifth of the poet's vocabulary dates after the year 1586." Remember that Hart argued for a composition date of 1588, so he claims "Our greatest dramatist intuitively understood that he must use words current in his own generation."<sup>51</sup> Unwittingly, he too offers evidence matching Johnson's idea that the language and context of the play was almost impossibly current, too fashionable and voguish to last. The language and allusions in *Love's Labour's Lost* were so fresh, so new, and so unique in the canon, that real interpretation has been almost impossible, but within this "mint of phrases" can be found not only keys to understanding the context of the play, but unlocking for the reader a clear picture of its author.

## *Notes*

- 1 Johnson, 180.
- 2 Johnson, 182.
- 3 Johnson, 182.
- 4 Pendergast, ix.
- 5 Johnson, 182
- 6 The author picks up this theme again in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Puck predicts "Jack shall have Jill . . . and all will be well." Shakespeare repeats the line "a twelvemonth and a day" twice near the end of the play and as Hibbard points out, that distinctive phrase "so reminiscent of Gawain, Wife of Bath – occurs twice in the last 100 lines of *Love's Labour's Lost* and nowhere else in the whole of Shakespeare's writings." Hibbard, 26.
- 7 Theobald, *The Works of Shakespeare*, 1733 in Vickers, 498.
- 8 Gildon, *The Works of Mr. William Shakespeare*, in Vickers, 242.
- 9 Gildon, 311, in Vickers, 242. Elsewhere, Gildon says again that the "false Numbers and Rhimes" are convincing enough that this play "was one of his first." Gildon, *Shakespeare's Life and Words*, 1710 in Vickers, 181.
- 10 Alexander Pope, *Edition of Shakespeare*, 1725, see Vickers, 413.
- 11 Theobald, in Vickers, 497.
- 12 H.C. Hart, x.
- 13 Pendergast, 8.
- 14 Alfred Hart, 246. It should be noted that some scholars see echoes of the two long poems in *Love's Labour's Lost*, so it is not unusual to theorize that they were all composed within the same time span. Edmond Malone, as early as 1778, suggested one of the earliest composition dates at 1591 and E.K. Chambers argued for 1595.

- 15 H.C. Hart, xviii.
- 16 Pendergast, vii.
- 17 H.C. Hart, xxvi.
- 18 William Farina argues for another event entirely – a masque in 1579 before the Queen and the French ambassador. The text of this lost masque could be an early version of *Love's Labour's Lost* or a source for the play, but it definitely sets the dating earlier than most other scholars. (see Farina, 49, for more) Farina argues the play was not for mass consumption, but meant for a small, rarefied group, which makes sense if the source is a reference to the Russian visit to England.
- 19 Hibbard, 32.
- 20 Hibbard, 29.
- 21 Hibbard, 29. Revision is a tricky subject in Elizabethan drama, and we know that not all plays that claim to be revised have been so. Nonetheless, the idea needs investigation.
- 22 Hibbard goes so far as to group *LLL* and *MND* together because they have so much rhyme, the former having 43.1% of total lines in rhyme and the latter 45.5% according to his calculations.
- 23 Of course, the most famous play-within-a-play appears in *Hamlet*, but it too has complicated theories about its source. If it is original, we see Shakespeare again reverting to a plot device that has worked for him in the past. Although some scholars suggest the theory of an Ur-*Hamlet* (for which there is zero historical evidence) there is also the theory that it too was adapted from Francois de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (1576), which had not yet been translated into English when Shakespeare adapted it. However, one ought to remember that the Earl of Oxford's facility with languages put him within reach of any number of sources that were likely inaccessible to Shakespeare.
- 24 Hibbard, 44.
- 25 Hibbard, 34.
- 26 Hibbard, 34. Even though Hibbard's view of the play is not as critical as that of some of his predecessors, claiming it is "lyrical," (in the words of E.K.

- Chambers) he is still determined to subordinate the play to others.
- 27 Farina, 51.
- 28 Hibbard, 43.
- 29 Pendergast, vii.
- 30 Farina, 50. He continues: “Bullough noted that among the English nobility, Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby, had the chance to extensively interact with King Henry during concerted (but ultimately thwarted) military operations in 1589, without mentioning that Bertie was de Vere’s brother-in-law.” William Carroll also argues, “I believe this play can profitably be read as a debate on the right uses of rhetoric, poetry, and the imagination,” (Carroll, 8). But even Carroll lets himself believe in the early date because that is what best fits Shakespeare’s life. Like other scholars, he too thinks it is a revival of euphuism.
- 31 Peacham, 95.
- 32 Burlinson, 13.
- 33 As Joseph Sobran points out, a myriad of strange questions arise when one begins to scrape the thin surface of the official biography: why did no one eulogize Shakespeare, especially in an age given to extravagant praise of literary giants? England, especially theatrical England, was a small place and it is improbable, bordering on impossible that the two playwrights, if indeed they were two, never met.
- 34 Farina, 51. Oxford had also been admitted to Gray’s Inn as a teenager and studied law, so there is a possibility that the Revels of 1594 made Russians topical again, but it is equally possible that *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was written prior to that celebration and served as the influence for it rather than the other way around.
- 35 Some scholars think the character of Boyet in the play is a thinly-veiled caricature of Philip Sydney.
- 36 See Spenser’s *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, the month of August, for a word-duel between the characters of Perigot and Willy.
- 37 Londré, 8.



- 38 Londré, 8.
- 39 Sobran, 9.
- 40 Hart, “The Growth of Shakespeare’s Vocabulary,” 242.
- 41 Sobran elaborates, “At least six of his plays were printed between 1594 and 1597 – that is, after his poems had made his reputation. Yet none of these plays bore his name. Shakespeare was never publicly identified as a playwright before 1598. Why not? His name on the title pages would have increased sales considerably. The scholars have not attempted to explain this fact.” (38).
- 42 Hibbard, 24.
- 43 Hibbard, 36.
- 44 Oxford’s maternal uncle was Arthur Golding, the great English translator of Ovid; for some time Oxford and Golding lived in the same household, that of William Cecil, Lord Burghley. William Carroll writes: “*Love’s Labour’s Lost* is in fact permeated with other reminders of Ovid: from the echo of *tempus edax rerum* in “cormorant devouring Time (1.1.4), through the imagery of love’s warfare and hunt, to the whole theme of transformation.” (Carroll, 126).
- 45 *Love’s Labour’s Lost* has a number of words that appear only in this play. According to Hart, “l’envoy” appears fourteen times, “Muscovite” three and “pricket” six. (See Hart, 244.) “In writing *LLL* Shakespeare seems to have resolved to renew in part his existing stock of words; over twenty-one percent of the vocabulary consists of fresh words” (Hart, 253). Even Hibbard himself points out the unusual vocabulary and experimentation with words, pointing out for example that “Promethean” only appears again in *Othello*. See Hibbard, 38.
- 46 Sobran, 262.
- 47 Sobran, 242-43.
- 48 Sobran, 242. See also Sobran’s “ ‘Shakespeare’ Revealed in Oxford’s Poetry” in Richard Malim’s *Great Oxford: Essays on the Life and Work of Edward De Vere*. For the full text of Sobran’s paper on Oxford’s poetry, see it online at the website of the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship.

- 49 Sobran reminds us that Oxford, in his letters, often used his name as a pun, easily moving between Latin and English and in the plays, we see ‘A truth’s a truth’ (*All’s Well*); ‘But truth is truth’ (*King John*); ‘Is not the truth the truth?’ (*1 Henry IV*). See 275-276.
- 50 Johnson, in Creighton, 316.
- 51 Hart, “The Growth of Shakespeare’s Vocabulary,” 243.

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