

3. *Love's Labour's Lost*

Faust. What is the end of study, let me know?

Meph. Why, that to know which else we should not know.

Faust. Things hid and barr'd, you mean, from common sense?

Meph. Ay, that is study's god-like recompense.

Faust. Come on, then; I will swear to study so,
To know the thing I am forbid to know.

The reader who is familiar with *Doctor Faustus* and *Love's Labour's Lost* will have realized that these lines are, in fact, a conversation between Berowne and the King of Navarre from the latter play. I have transposed them to the apparently very different context of Marlowe's play in order to suggest that, though Shakespeare's mode is very light, his theme is not so distant from Marlowe's. Marlowe was, in fact, a member of the very 'school of night' to which the King later refers as wearing 'the badge of hell', the heretical 'Schoole of Atheism' whose chief patron, Sir Walter Raleigh, had been disgraced in 1592. Shakespeare's patron, Southampton, was a member of Essex' rival faction. We can get a whiff of the spirit of the School of Night from a poem which Peele addressed to another member of it, the Earl of Northumberland, in 1593, the very year in which *Doctor Faustus* had its first public performance, Marlowe was murdered, and Shakespeare wrote *Love's Labour's Lost*:

Familiar with the stars and zodiac,
To whom the heaven lies open as her book;
By whose directions undeceivable,
Leaving our schoolmen's vulgar trodden paths,
And following the ancient reverend steps
Of Trismegistus and Pythagoras,
Through uncouth ways and unaccessible,
Dost pass into the spacious pleasant fields
Of divine science and philosophy;
From whence beholding the deformities
Of common errors, and world's vanity,
Dost here enjoy the sacred sweet content
That baser souls, not knowing, not affect.

Love's Labour's Lost opens with the King of Navarre inviting three other noble young men, Berowne, Longaville and Dumaine, to join him in living, for three years, a monastic life devoted to study. There is no suggestion that their studies are likely to lead them towards atheism or the black arts, but there is a strong suggestion that all such academies, such withdrawals from the world into the life of the mind, are fraught with danger. When such behaviour is no more than the passing fancy of affected and

inexperienced youth, it is no great matter, or matter for comic resolution. But it had been a serious matter for Raleigh, and was to be so for the Duke in *Measure for Measure* and for Prospero. Navarre's desire for eternal fame, and for the 'god-like recompense' of the study of 'things hid and barr'd' is not so far from Faustus' lines:

O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promis'd to the studious artisan!

...

A sound magician is a demi-god;
Here tire, my brains, to get a deity!

The danger is of that *hubris* which drives a man, in straining for an unnatural and unattainable god-like perfection, to spurn or neglect his proper sphere, the life of the body in time and in the world. Man's unique place in the Great Chain of Being, likening the beasts to the angels, gave him two options. He could either strive to exterminate the beast in himself and become god-like, perfect himself in opposition to Nature (including his own god-given nature); or he could seek to reconcile the warring elements (as the alchemists did), converting duality, the terrible dual vision of tragedy, by acceptance into mutuality, interdependence, harmony, symbolized by marriage. And this is the pattern of all the festive comedies.

According to Carl Jung, a characteristic difference between the sexes is that men tend to strive for perfection, whereas women strive for completeness. Shakespeare's sympathies seem to have been, from the first, with the latter. The quest for perfection becomes grotesque or destructive when it leads too far from the completeness which must include the obligations and exigencies of the real world, and an acknowledgement in men of their kinship with Caliban. When a man takes the quest for perfection beyond the point of no return we have tragedy. If men do not pursue it beyond the point at which they can be brought back to their senses, by, for example, the mockery or the love of women, we have comedy.

The King is described as 'the sole inheritor /Of all perfections that a man may owe'. The purpose of his edict is to strive for still more perfection. The world is 'gross' because it is entirely given over to the purposes and processes of time – 'cormorant devouring time' which obliterates everything in death. The young men must therefore transcend death, discover some 'grace' to triumph over the 'disgrace of death'. But their quest for 'grace' and 'eternity' is not a submission of their lives and wills to god, but an arrogant, narcissistic pursuit of fame. They will be famous as heroes in the fight against 'their own affections /And the huge army of the world's desires'; that is, in the fight against Nature, including human nature. Their fight will take the form of study, book-learning, 'living in philosophy' - which is where they set out upon the same road as Faustus.

The young men commit themselves to strict abstinence in a parody of puritanical legalism - 'Out late edict shall strongly stand in force', - swearing to keep 'those statutes / That are recorded in this schedule here'. They are making war against their own affections, vowing to die to love. If the soul is that part of the self which loves, then, in subscribing their names, they are, like Faustus, signing their souls away. Of course we

know from the play's title, and from the tone of the opening, that they are not on the road to damnation (or if they are, we know that they will not get far along it), but they are in danger of errors which, without the conventions of comedy, and without the saving intervention of strong women (in collusion with the old Adam in *Berowne*), could have been more serious. But they are, underneath their privileged affectations, normal young men, merely carried away by a passing fashionable enthusiasm. Their commitment to their oath is very shallow.

Berowne is a little more mature, realistic and sensible than the others. His irrepressible common-sense undermines the whole enterprise from the outset. He can't take 'that angel knowledge' seriously. He knows the value of book-learning:

Small have continual plodders ever won
Save base authority from others' books.

He knows that the attempt to deny their own affections is doomed:

For every man with his affects is born
Not by might master'd, but by special grace.

Moreover, he knows that it is perverse to attempt to defeat the seasonal nature of Nature and of man's life within it:

At Christmas I no more desire a rose
Than wish a snow in May's new-fangled shows,
But like of each thing that in season grows.

In spite of these reservations, he takes his oath in the spirit of making up a team for a game. But it is a game which involves sealing off the four from the rest of the human race.

It is, after all, not a play about *Berowne*. None of the comedies are plays about individuals locked within their own characters, as all the tragedies are (and the satirical comedies of Jonson or Molière); they are about communities where people determine their own and each other's lives. There is the scene where poor constable Dull has not spoken a word, nor understood one neither, but is, in the last line, drawn into the festivities: 'I'll make one in a dance, or so.' Despite the focus on marriage, love is not, in these plays, merely sexual love, but the whole network of sympathies and dependencies which knit together a human community, and weave human beings into the wider patterns of the non-human world.

No sooner have the four young men taken their oaths, including the oath 'not to see a woman in that term', than the pressures of 'necessity' - that is, of real life - force them to break it. The Princess of France arrives:

We must perforce dispense with this decree.
She must lie here on mere necessity.

That force, as Berowne is quick to point out, is the force which decrees, far more strongly than any king, that life cannot go forward without feelings and relationships:

Necessity will make us all forsworn
Three thousand times within this three years' space.

In the same speech in which Boyet describes the king in terms of perfection, he describes the Princess in terms of completeness and the prodigality of Nature. When the king tells her that he would be breaking his oath to admit her to his court, she says: "Tis deadly sin to keep that oath'. She is aware that what the young men are doing is not only silly and impractical, but would, were they to carry it through, lead to the deadly sin of Pride. For the idea that perfection could be achieved in isolation from women and from the world at large, is hubristic in the extreme.

Of course, this being the kind of play it is, the king and his three courtiers immediately fall in love with the Princess and her three attendants. Formally the play becomes more and more like a dance or masque, as each young man in turn is overheard composing his love-sonnet. The form of the play depends little on plot or conflict, as a tragedy does, but almost entirely on rituals, games, dances, masques, and court or country pastimes. These have in common that they are all public or group activities. The few attempts in the play to do anything private or secret are immediately discovered or overheard and made public, made available for evaluation in social terms. Thus the formal elements perfectly express the play's theme, the need for concord, harmony, in all things - within the individual (as opposed to the 'war against your own affections') in sexual and social relationships, and in the whole natural order.

The four young men are mocked directly by the four young ladies, and indirectly by the commoners. The two pedants, Holofernes and Sir Nathaniel, seem to have eat paper and drunk ink. Theirs is book-learning shorn of all the high ideals in which the courtiers have dressed theirs, revealed in all its sterility. In the middle of their display of dead and useless knowledge comes the reading of Berowne's love letter to Rosaline, mistakenly delivered to Jaquenetta, in which Berowne avers, as a romantic conceit, what he and the play are to realize as true, that there is more to be learned from the eyes of a loved woman than from all books:

Study his bias leaves and makes his book thine eyes,
Where all those pleasures live that art would comprehend.
If knowledge be the mark, to know thee shall suffice.

Again we have woman as completeness. Women's eyes, says Berowne later, are 'the books, the arts, the academes / That show, contain, and nourish all the world.' No longer do the young men seek fame as 'brave conquerors of their own affections / And the huge army of the world's desires'. Now their battle is to win the world in winning these ladies:

Advance your standards, and upon them, lords!

This is not so much a witty play as a play about wit. 'It rejoiceth my intellect. True wit!' says don Armado. But true wit is not the childish pedantry and chop-logic of

learned fools, such as Armado admires. The true wit of the play is Berowne's - intelligence, command of language, subtlety, quickness and humour, all in the service of truth; for example the speech in which he justifies to his comrades the breaking of their oath:

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. [IV.iii.210-15]

But even such admirable wit has its limitations. It is not really appropriate for matters of the deepest seriousness. Berowne is not yet taking love completely seriously, as an adult commitment. A few lines later he says:

For revels, dances, masques, and merry hours
Forerun fair Love, strewing her way with flowers.

It is still a game.

Being in love is an improvement on the vanities of the monastic oath; but it, too, is at first an affectation. The young men are in love with love. They are still out of touch with the real world and with their own full humanity, which, if they were really in love, would express itself in more serious and selfless concern. Yet they believe themselves. The ladies make no such mistake. They receive the wooing for the game it is:

We have received your letters, full of love;
Your favors, the ambassadors of love;
And in our maiden council rated them
At courtship, pleasant jest, and courtesy,
As bombast and as lining to the time.
But more devout than this in our respects
Have we not been, and therefore met your loves
In their own fashion, like a merriment. [V.ii.778-85]

The princess doubts the ability of these young men to enter into any lasting commitments.

Berowne, as we might expect, is the first to realize that wit is self-regarding, showing off, and not, in the last analysis, wholly honest:

Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise,
Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation,
Figures pedantical – these summer flies
Have blown me full of maggot ostentation.
I do forswear them; and I here protest
By this white glove (how white the hand, God knows!)

Henceforth my wooing mind shall be expressed
In russet yeas and honest kersey noes. [V.ii.407-14]

The courtiers have something to learn from the commoners where humanity and honesty are concerned. The young men, seeing only the witlessness of the Nine Worthies, regard them merely as objects on which to exercise their own mocking wit. Armado is sensitive enough to feel that the mockery of him is an insult to the hero he plays – Hector:

The sweet war-man is dead and rotten.
Sweet chucks, beat not the bones of the buried.
When he breathed, he was a man. [V.ii.661-3]

Holofernes rebukes them more roundly: ‘This is not generous, not gentle, not humble’. Even Costard, vulgar as he is, can give them a lesson in generous and gentle humility when he excuses the incompetence of Nathaniel as Alexander:

There, an ‘t please you, a foolish mild man; an honest man, look you, and soon dashed. He is a marvelous good neighbor, faith, and a very good bowler; but for Alisander – alas! You see how ‘tis – a little o’er-parted. [V.ii.578-83]

The princess, seeing the good-nature and good intentions behind their crude performances, gives them courteous attention and generous thanks.

Comedy, like tragedy, requires change through suffering. The heroes of comedy are capable of such change. But we are nearing the end of the play, and our heroes have far to go, if they are to prove worthy of the hands of these ladies. Their wordy, ostentatious love-making so far has depended wholly upon the general atmosphere of holiday and merriment. Could their love survive outside that hothouse climate? Could it survive the winter world, the world in which people actually die? It is put to this test by the sudden arrival of a messenger with news that the princess' father has died.

The young men are unwilling to let the ladies depart without pledging their love. Berowne has learned that ‘Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief’. He humbly admits that they have been fools, false to themselves; he hopes that

even that falsehood, in itself a sin,
Thus purifies itself and turns to grace. [V.ii.776-7]

But purification and grace are never, in Shakespeare, not even in the lightest comedies, acquired so painlessly. Time is running out, both for the characters, since the princess must depart, and for the play, which must end. The king still hopes for an easy conventional ending:

Now, at the latest minute of the hour
Grant us your loves.

But the princess is not to be rushed into taking such a weighty matter as marriage so lightly:

A time, methinks, too short
To make a world-without -end bargain in.

The love the young men declare must be given the test of time, and of exposure to some deprivation, far from the self-indulgence of the court.

Your oath I will not trust, but go with speed
To some forlorn and naked hermitage,
Remote from all the pleasures of the world;
There stay until the twelve celestial signs
Have brought about the annual reckoning.
If this austere insociable life
Change not your offer made in heat of blood –
If frosts and fasts, hard lodging and thin weeds,
Nip not the gaudy blossoms of your love,
But that it bear this trial, and last love –
Then, at the expiration of the year,
Come challenge me, challenge me by these deserts,
And, by this virgin palm now kissing thine,
I will be thine; and till that instant, shut
My woeful self up in a mourning house,
Raining the tears of lamentation
For the remembrance of my father's death.
If this thou do deny, let our hands part,
Neither entitled in the other's heart. [V.ii.795-813]

For shallow and false reasons the king had sought to repudiate love for the sake of the monastic life. Now he is required to embrace that life in earnest for the sake of love. Rosaline's task for Berowne is equally appropriate. He had been 'a gibing spirit'. Now he must

Visit the speechless sick, and still converse
With groaning wretches.

The king consoles him:

Come, sir, it wants a twelvemonth and a day,
And then 'twill end.

But Berowne's last words are:

That's too long for a play.

Indeed, the play must end without the multiple marriages of the later comedies. But it is not to end without a potent affirmation of community, of humanity in harmony with the

life of nature and the passing seasons. It ends with one of Shakespeare's finest songs. Nothing could be further from the artifice of the opening. In its movement from spring to winter, its homely simplicity, naturalness, harsh realism, in its cast of unglamorous but vivid rural characters, Tom, Marian, Dick the Shepherd, and greasy Joan, it contains that whole 'gross world' and its 'baser slaves' that the four had vowed to spurn, and measures the distance they have yet to travel to their hoped-for atonement.

[© Keith Sagar 2001. This essay may be quoted with due acknowledgement.]