

Love's Labor's Lost

W.Shakespeare

April 14, 2017

Reading through this play you are puzzled, it seems too inconsequential. It may very well be so, after all it may have been one of the first, if not the very first of the plays written by Shakespeare. The plot is simple, a young king and three companions, who have sworn an oath to the effect that they should devote the next three years to serious study and forswear any ties with women. Only one of them - Berowne - alerts his companions to the impracticability of the scheme, as the King will soon receive the ambassador of the French king, headed by his daughter and her three female companions. The conclusion of the whole set up is of course predictable from the start, as it no doubt was intended to be.

The set up may not work as well on the page, as it appears rather trifling, but maybe work very well on the stage, as it is of course meant to do. You read with your eyes, and you listen with your ears, and here is always a wide gulf between the written and the spoken. Reading is a solitary event, while staging is an eminently social. The whole play rides on wit always flirting close to the bawdy and the vulgar, yet never really crossing the line. This is done by innuendoes, some obvious, some subtle, with references no doubt beyond the reach of the majority of spectators, but that does not really matter, as long as the momentum of merriment is forceful enough to be unimpeded by the occasional obstruction along the road it is fated to travel.

Beauty doth varnish age as if new-born,/and gives the crutch the cradle's infancy. (IV.iii/250). What does it mean? The editions I consult give a lot of explanation of words and meanings opaque only to the dim-witted, yet pass over this in silence. What does it mean? If you do not know, you better be silent, nothing is as foolish and as revealing as a wrong answer, better to keep your mouth shut and your pen idle, so as to keep the suspicion of wisdom properly concealed, than disclose the emptiness within. So what does it mean? Should it be seen as bawdy? Does crutch stand for crotch? And thus imply that beauty eggs something on (residing in the crotch) and makes it as if newborn (and ready for action?). Googling refers to 'crutch' as being used in the regular sense, as a support for cripples. Or should we simply retain the meaning, and thus think of the penis as crippled in old age, but now being renewed, or as a crutch itself, but the latter seems grammatically far-fetched. Or could it be so easy that beauty rejuvenates, in particular replaces the crutch with a cradle, as a way of straightforward hyperbole. This does of course not contradict a bawdier meaning.

More transparent are the mock complaints of the young ladies of the lengthy declarations of love produced by their masked suitors. **K.** *Yes, madame; and moreover,/some thousand verses of a faithful lover:/A huge translation of hypocrisy,/Vilely compiled, profound simplicity.* to be joined by **M.** *This, and these pearls, to me sent Longaville./The letter is too long by half a mile.* To which the princess comments. *I think no less. Dost thou not wish in heart/The chain were longer and the letter short.* (V.ii, 50 bis).

And finally a linguistic remark. *They did not bless us with one happy word.* (V.ii.371).

The use of 'happy' is strange to the modern English reader and has to be explained. In Swedish, a more archaic Germanic tongue, we could still write 'ett lyckosamt ord' where 'lycko' comes from 'lycka' meaning 'happy' and related of course to 'lucky' which may be a better correspondent to 'lyckosam' (replete with luck) meaning apt, just as we in English can speak about a 'luckless word' as an inept (or inapt) one.

Of course there is more to say about the plot and its subsidiary characters and the ironic, not to say sarcastic uses Shakespeare makes of them, but the whole thing is, when said and done, a trifle, and merits nothing beyond pedantic attention, samples of which have just been delivered.

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