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English 382

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Concerning the Ending of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*

In 1598, audiences gathered at the English theater to delight in a new play. Printed on the title page of the play's quarto were the words, "A pleasant conceited comedie called Loues labors lost. As it was presented before her Highnes this last Christmas. Newly corrected and augmented by W. Shakespere." This was the first time William Shakespeare's name appeared on one of his plays (Gray, *Life and Times*). Perhaps this was due to Shakespeare having created *Love's Labour's Lost* without borrowing from a familiar story (Shmoop). Still early in his career, Shakespeare had a lot at stake. The safer choice would have been to write a play based on a pre-existing story, as he did with all his other plays. He would only have chosen to write an original play if he had a very good reason to write it, which means something in Shakespeare's life motivated him to write his own play. It could have been the outbreak of the plague, the success of Shakespeare's other projects, or Shakespeare's relationships during his writing. The influences are most visible in the major oddity of the play, the ending. While most Shakespearian comedies end in happiness and marriage, the ending of *Love's Labour's Lost* leaves its characters unhappy and without resolution. This paper will explore the ending of *Love's Labour's Lost* during its place in history while it was being written as well as in its context of the play. The evidence shows that Shakespeare may have planned on a happy ending when he wrote the play, but outside forces caused the unhappy ending.

The ending of *Love's Labour's Lost* is unfitting because the play is categorized as a comedy and comedies generally end with happiness ("comedy, n.1"). The play's main storyline follows the characters of the King of Navarre and his three friends, Longaville, Dumain, and Biron. These four friends enter into an oath that for three years they will do nothing but study and swear off women. As they discuss the details of their pact, it is remembered that the Princess of France is on her way to speak to the King, therefore the King must break his oath of not speaking to a woman for three years. When the Princess and her ladies arrive, however, the King and all his friends fall in love with the women. This starts a mess of mixed up love notes, hypocritical accusations, disguises, vows of true love, and many other elements expected in a Shakespearian comedy. Yet in most plays by Shakespeare, the characters find marriage and happiness. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, all the labors of love performed by the characters are, as the title spoils, lost. The Princess receives news that her father, the King, died and chooses to go back to France with her ladies rather than stay with the King of Navarre. They assign each male character a task to perform to prove their love over the next year. If by then their feelings remain the same, the women agree

to accept their offers of love, but there is no guarantee. The characters themselves comment on the unresolved feeling the situation creates. The King states, “Come, sir, it wants a twelvemonth and a day, / And then ‘twill end.” Beron finishes the king’s thought with, “That’s too long for a play” (5.2.868-70). The men are left with no choice but to watch the women leave. The play ending without the marriage of the potential couples leaves the audience with a confusing mess of questions and disappointment. Shakespeare probably wanted his only original play to be successful, so it is curious he would end the play in such an unhappy way.

One cause for the lovers’ stories being cut short could be due to the pattern of lives being cut short while Shakespeare wrote the play. Because the play was first performed for the queen in the winter of 1597, the play would have been written between 1593 and 1594; a time, Terry Gray explains, when theaters were shut down due to an outbreak of the plague. He speculates that “he [Shakespeare] probably was not writing for the stage during 1593-1594, but this does not mean he did not write plays with a view to the theaters reopening or for the private entertainment of his aristocratic friends. In fact, it is often speculated that *Love’s Labour’s Lost* belongs to this period” (A Shakespeare Timeline). If the play was written during this time of plague and death, it would explain several moments in the play’s ending. Historically the numbers of the dead grew to over 10,000 in 1593 and there were no theaters to relieve the stress and depression (Gray, A Shakespeare Timeline). The unresolved ending could reference the abrupt ending of so many lives destroyed during this period of time. Unlike most comedies, this play ends with a death. It is known in the first act that the princess’s father is “decrepit, sick, and bed-rid” (1.1.137). In act five, The Spaniard, Armado, brings the princess sad news: “I am sorry, madam; for the news I bring / Is heavy in my tongue. The king your father—”, but before he can finish the princess cries out, “Dead, for my life!” with Armado confirming, “Even so: my tale is told” (5.2.710-13). If Shakespeare wrote this play during a period of plague, news such as this would be brought almost constantly to people. It may not be that he chose to end the play this way on purpose, but the circumstances in which he wrote the play influenced him to leave the ending unhappy.

At the same time Shakespeare wrote *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, he also wrote his sonnet sequence which, in many cases, mirrors the structure of the play. Because both texts were written near the same time, comparing the two creates valid insights that help explain the unresolved ending of the play. For example, the similarities between the sonnets and play show that Shakespeare is familiar with writing unresolved endings. Sonnet 126 particularly illustrates this point:

O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy pow’r
 Dost hold time’s fickle glass, his sickle hour,
 Who hast by waning grown, and therein show’st

Thy lovers withering, as thy sweet self grow'st—
 If nature, sovereign mistress over wrack,
 As thou goest onwards still will pluck thee back,
 She keeps thee to this purpose, that her skill
 May time disgrace, and wretched minute kill.
 Yet fear her, O thou minion of her pleasure;
 She may detain but not still keep her treasure.
 Her audit, though delayed answered must be,
 And her quietus is to render thee.

One sign of the lack of resolution is the decaying form, with only 12 lines rather than the full 14 normally used in sonnets. Stephan Booth explains that, “This sonnet, composed of six rhymed iambic couplets, is not a sonnet in any technical sense; it is a sonnet in that it is a short lyric (430). Along with form, content in this poem reveals an unhappy resolution. In the sonnet, the narrator is addressing the “lovely boy” (1) and telling him that time and nature are granting him special treatment. Rather than grow uglier with age, he has aged beautifully, unlike his “lovers withering” (4). The lover narrator warns the lovely boy that eventually nature will have to pay back the debt it has loaned to time and the lovely boy will lose his beauty. The sonnet is complimentary of the lovely boy, but the threatening ending to this sonnet creates a feeling similar to the lack of conclusion in *Love's Labour's Lost*. In both the poem and the play, time is the villain. Time will take away the lovely boy's beauty and time will keep the couples apart. In the play, the King begs the princess, “Now, at the latest minute of the hour, / Grant us your loves” (5.2.778-79), but the princess says they must wait a year to be together. The couples cannot be married at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost* and the narrator and the lovely boy cannot end contentedly in the sonnets. Further digging reveals where these frustrations come from and how they are translated into the play's ending.

Many scholars have theorized that Shakespeare wrote *Love's Labour's Lost* to be performed for a private audience containing the Earl of Southampton. Terry Gray already explained that even with the theaters closed Shakespeare continued writing plays to be performed for close friends. History shows a deep relationship between Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton, but speculation leads to theories about a deeper relationship between the two men. Austin K. Gray studied the life of Southampton and his relationship with Shakespeare. He shows how Shakespeare's plays affected the Earl's life, going so far as to show correlations between the story of *Love's Labour's Lost* and the life of Southampton. Austin Gray says, “Probably, Southampton felt himself to be both hero and creator of that play” (611). Later, Shakespeare dedicated several of his plays to the Earl including *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Shakespeare and the Earl were friends, but if their relationship carried into deeper senses of love

it could explain why Shakespeare could not write a happy ending in *Love's Labour's Lost*. If, in the Sonnets, the Earl is the lovely boy and Shakespeare is the ambiguous narrator, the Sonnets reveal many emotions about their relationship, including frustration at never being together. Perhaps Shakespeare refused to give his characters a happy ending in *Love's Labour's Lost* because he was not granted a happy ending in his own love life. The Earl of Southampton being among the first audiences to experience the play certainly gives reason for the play's unresolved ending. Shakespeare may have been trying to communicate his feelings to his friend in the hopes that he would understand and share the frustrations. The Earl of Southampton may be a contributing factor for the play's lack of resolution, but there are more reasons why Shakespeare may have chosen to end the play unhappily.

Though claimed that the unresolved ending is a message to the Earl of Southampton, perhaps the unhappy ending is not the message Shakespeare originally sent. An important thing to remember is a line from the quarto mentioned above: "Newly corrected and augmented by W. Shakespere" (Gray, Life and Times). The quarto appeared after the private performances with the Queen and the Earl. Terry Gray points out that, "Because it is full of inside jokes and parodies, [. . .] [*Loves Labour's Lost*] does seem to have strong associations with the Southampton circle." If so many inside jokes can be found in the play now after it has been revised, one must wonder what pieces of the play Shakespeare "corrected and augmented." Is it too bold to claim that Shakespeare wrote an ending where the lovers found happiness and resolution? One of the lessons taught in the play is to make time for fun and friends and not to get too caught up in work. With the written ending now found in the play, the women leave at the end and the men must get back to work. Perhaps Shakespeare wrote an ending where fun and friends win over work. Considering the relationship that Shakespeare had with the Earl of Southampton, this could be a fitting message to send to his friend. The only facts behind this theory are that Shakespeare wrote the play for a private audience and that he later changed the play for the public theater. There is no way to prove the ending was ever anything but what is now found in the play. But even if the play always ended unhappily, Shakespeare may not have meant to leave it that way forever.

There may still be one more important historical reason as to why Shakespeare did not resolve the ending of *Love's Labour's Lost* which is that Shakespeare may have written a sequel. An essay written about English plays by Francis Meres in 1598 is one piece of evidence that shows the lost play, *Love's Labour's Won*. In his essay he writes,

As *Plautus* and *Seneca* are accounted the best for comedy and Tragedy among the Latines: so *Shakespeare* among y^e English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage; for Comedy, witnes his *Ge[n]tleme[n] of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Loue labors lost*, his ***Loue labours wonne***, his *Midsommers night dreame*, & his *Merchant of Venice*: for Tragedy his *Richard the 2*. *Richard*

the 3. Henry the 4. King Iohn, Titus Andronicus and his Romeo and Iuliet. (Team Orange, emphasis added)

This is the first reference to the lost play, though no detail is given about its content or purpose. Similarly, in 1953 Pottesman, a bookseller and antiquarian in London, discovered a packing slip from 1603. The paper listed several plays by Shakespeare including “*marchant of vennis,*” “*taming of a shrew,*” “*loves labor lost,*” and “*loves labor won*” (Team Orange). For years Scholars have searched for more evidence and formed theories for a play titled, *Love’s Labour’s Won*. They believe that “[t]he most logical guess at a story is the courtships suspended at the close of *Love’s Labour’s lost*” (Team Orange). If *Love’s Labour’s Won* was sequel to *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, it would explain the lack of resolution at the end of the play. Cedric Watts quotes G.R. Hibbard in his review of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*: “It seems beyond doubt therefore, that it did exist, that it was published, and that it has since disappeared” (418). Watts suggests that in the sequel, “the four laord meet after their year of probations and, after fresh *contretemps*, finally win the ladies’ hands in marriage” (418). Other scholars have a different theory. Many of them believe *Love’s Labour’s Won* is the original title for *All’s Well That Ends Well*. Because there is no timeframe for when Shakespeare wrote, or intended to write, the play, Shakespeare’s motives for writing the play are unclear. Considering the circumstances of writing *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Shakespeare could very well have wanted to rectify his lack of happiness at the end of the play and write a sequel when times got better. Basically, he may have wanted to wait until the plague ended before he wrote a happy ending for his play.

The reason for the unhappy ending could exist within the play itself. In asking other readers of the play about their opinions, several key responses helped clarify the unhappy ending. One reader suggested thinking of the word “Lost” in terms of “forgotten or hidden” rather than as “defeated” (Bevins). With this in mind, the title alone changes from defeated acts of love, to hidden acts of love. What this thinking does is give worth to the efforts of the characters to form relationships with the ones they love. Delayed love does not fix the lack of resolution of the play, but it leaves a hopeful ending that love will eventually endure rather than an unhappy ending where love is defeated for good. Another reader commented about how complicated the ending of the play could get if four wedding ceremonies were being performed at the same time. This reader states, “Most of the earlier comedies have 2 pairs, if you think about it. Four on-stage marriage announcements might be a bit excessive” (Martin). Shakespeare is no stranger to complex story-lines and characters, but this theory makes sense when remembered that this is the only play Shakespeare wrote alone. In his other plays, he was able to draw from pre-existing stories and complicate them further. In the case of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Shakespeare was responsible for the skeleton and muscle of his story; therefore, he had to simplify things in this play. Another source talked

about the concept of making and keeping oaths being a major issue in the play. At the end of the play the women commit the men to oaths with the promise of love as a reward for keeping them. For example, Katherine tells Dumain, “A twelve month and a day / I’ll mark no words that smooth-faced wooer say: / Come when the king doth to my lady come; / Then, if I have much love, I’ll give you some” (5.2.819-22). Eagerly, Dumain replies, “I’ll serve thee true and faithfully till then” (5.2.823). But Katherine is wary of the inconsistency of the men. All the ladies have seen them break oaths. The men promised to study for three years, yet within moments of the women arriving they broke their oaths and fell in love with the women. Now Katherine warns Dumain, “Yet swear not, lest you be forsworn again” (5.2.824). The women know better than to trust the men’s oaths. Had the happy ending taken place and the couples had gotten married, no lessons would be learned by the characters. They would have been rewarded for breaking their oaths—not a good lesson to teach. By showing the consequences of broken promises, Shakespeare shows the importance of keeping one’s word. He also shows how careful one must be when committing to an oath. If one cannot keep the oath, it would be better not to make the oath at all.

Reasons for the startling ending can be found within the play; however there is a danger in only analyzing the text without incorporating context. Thomas M. Greene explores language and setting, explaining, “Not only is there missing any incarnation of responsible authority, any strong and wise center of political power, but here is equally missing any representative of a stable and dependable citizenry. There is nobody here who, however quirky or foolish or provincial, can be counted on, when he is multiplied enough times, to keep society functioning” (315). Greene blames this on his belief that the play is “a little disembodied” and has a “lack [. . .] of any firm social underpinning” (315). In his essay, Greene looks at the play textually to show that “the play is really about ‘society’ [. . .] It is much concerned with society, and the happiness of life in society” (315). If Greene wants to show that the play has no authoritative structure but it is happy in society, it is no wonder that he must agree that “at the end, an much more surprisingly, does it turn out to reflect the failure” (315). Perhaps Greene did not know that Shakespeare wrote the play during a season of plague while coming to understand his intimate relationship with a close friend. Then he may have found the ending not to be a failure to

Beron best expresses the feelings of frustration over the unresolved ending of the play when he cries out, “Our wooing doth not end like an old play; / Jack hath not Jill” (5.2.866-67). There are many possible reasons for why Shakespeare ended his play with the startling, unhappy ending. It could be because of the time her wrote it, the audience he wrote it for, because he planned on writing a sequel, or he wanted to teach certain lessons in his play. Shakespeare cannot be blamed entirely for the lack of resolution. He was influenced by the problems of the world when he wrote. The play may still not offer resolution, even with these reasons in mind, but knowing the context of the play and mixing it with the lessons taught in the text produce a means of lessening the blow the unhappy ending presents.

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