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- 1 In his introduction to the Arden edition of *Love's Labour's Lost*, Henry Woudhuysen suggests that the main difficulty facing directors and actors of the play is “judging the play’s tone”.¹ He goes on to describe the difficulty as a matter of assessing the degree of seriousness to be attached to a given scene or action. Adducing the opening oath-taking scene as an example, he asks, “how seriously is an audience to take the play’s opening vows?”²
- 2 In this paper, I would like to argue that the tonal indeterminacy Woudhuysen identifies as a directing challenge is also a structural feature of the play, and part of an underlying discourse about shifting assumptions and values. In order to narrow the field, I will confine the scope of my discussion to a specific instance of tonal indeterminacy which I will hereafter refer to as the “dubious jest”. By this I mean a statement that leaves the listener – on or off stage – wondering whether the words are to be taken at face value, or as a joke. I will first demonstrate the prevalence of such statements in the play through a few choice examples and discuss what makes their seriousness so difficult to determine. I will then argue that these statements share a pattern, involving promises and hyperbole. This pattern allows the play to point away from the immediate dramatic context and towards courtroom hermeneutics as providing a possible interpretative blueprint. This detour by way of legal hermeneutics will lead to an emphasis on performance as the arbitrator of meaning, as well as on the axiological dimension of performative choices. I will conclude by suggesting that *Love's Labour's Lost* offers a very specific take on the commonplace of a play as a “mirror held up to nature”.³

1. Dubious jokes

- 3 In the first act, when the King of Navarre reminds a reluctant Berowne that he swore an oath to fast and study with him for three years, the latter replies that he “swore in

jest" (I.i.54).⁴ The statement is a masterpiece of ambiguity. For one thing, given the sacred, performative and self-validating dimension of an oath, it is not immediately clear what "swearing in jest" implies, or even whether it is not a contradiction in terms. For another, given the jocularity already displayed in the scene, the disclaimer itself, rather than the original oath, may be "in jest". In other words, Berowne may be joking about joking. The indeterminacy is amplified by the fact that the spoken oath, as opposed to the signing ceremony, took place off stage, in the story time before the beginning of the dramatic action, so that the tone in which the words were spoken is withheld from the audience, though not from the other characters.

- 4 Berowne's disclaimer sets a pattern for the rest of the play, involving statements whose degree of seriousness is obfuscated or problematic. The most remarkable of these may be Longaville's proclamation that any woman coming within a mile of Navarre's court will "lose her tongue" (I.i.122). It seems that the clause is not to be taken seriously, as Longaville assures a shocked Berowne that it is meant primarily as a deterrent. In fact, by the time the Princess and her retinue arrive, the clause has been effectively forgotten by all concerned, and the otherwise well-informed ladies do not even bother to mention it. And yet, we remain uncomfortably aware that the mutilation clause remains inscribed in the decree, and thus officially "on the books".
- 5 The ladies, too, are given to ambiguous statements, as when the hunting Princess announces that she will claim she missed on purpose if she fails to hit a deer. This seems to be a joke, given that the excuse is formulated before the fact and explicitly identified as a form of rationalization; yet the context suggests genuine compassion for the hunted animal, and creates indeterminacy as to whether the Princess is shooting to kill. The Princess again indulges in obfuscation near the end of the play. Bookending Longaville's threat of mutilation, the Princess "protest[s]" she would not enter the King's palace, even at the risk of enduring "a world of torments" (V.ii.352-354). This would seem an obvious exaggeration, had the Princess not previously emphasized the binding nature of the words "I protest" (II.i.155). When the King of Navarre "protest[ed]" that he had never received payment from the King of France, the Princess "arrest[ed his] word" (II.i.157).
- 6 At stake in these dubious jests is the kind of world that is being represented. In a realistic world, for example, the issue of whether the young men's vows are to be taken seriously would be a moot point. How can a promise to abstain from food and sleep be anything *but* a joke? Assessing the kind of world being represented is of course primarily a generic issue. Taking the simple Aristotelian definition of tragedy as a serious genre, and of comedy as being about trivial matters, we – if not the characters – should be able to lift some of the indeterminacies mentioned above. For example, given the play's billing as "pleasant comedy", it would seem obvious that Longaville's decree about cutting out women's tongues is not to be taken seriously. After all, this is not *Titus Andronicus*. However, invoking genre as a hermeneutics is a tricky business. Though a play's billing is one indication, our classification of Shakespeare's plays derives mainly from the 1623 Folio, which made some questionable choices, such as classifying *Cymbeline* as a tragedy. Besides, *Love's Labour's Lost's* status as a comedy is notoriously iffy, as hinted meta-dramatically by Berowne's statement that the story "does not end like an old play" (V.ii.842). Ultimately, then, determining genre must be based on the text itself, which makes any attempt at invoking genre as a means of interpreting statements a circular process, or at best a heuristic one.

- 7 Similarly, invoking form will not get the hearer or reader very far in assessing whether to take a statement as a joke or not. That is because the dubious jests referred to above are based on two patterns not instantly recognizable as markers of facetiousness. These patterns include a speech-act, namely the promise, or statement of intention, and a trope, the hyperbole. Berowne's opening statement that he "swore in jest" clearly partakes of both figures, involving a promise to abstain from basic necessities that could be taken as an overemphatic way of saying that he will study very hard. Similarly, when the Princess "rates" the lords' words of praise as "pleasant jest" (V.ii. 754), she is referring to hyperbolic eulogizing, combined with an implicit, but insincere, promise to wed.
- 8 Though false promises and hyperbole do appear as figures of jesting in Quintilian's *Institutes*,⁵ most classical and Renaissance treatises put the main emphasis on another classification, derived from Cicero's *De Oratore*. In Cicero's classification, jokes are divided into two main categories, which include the amusing anecdote and the clever rejoinder, or one-liner.⁶ The main difference between such jokes and those involving promises and/or hyperbole is one of framing. Anecdotes and one-liners may be formally set apart from serious discourse, as in such introductory clauses as, "did you hear the one about the traveling salesman?" These frames make uptake or recognition of the jesting mode easy. The problem with jokes based on promises and hyperbole is that they are formally no different from serious statements. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, this problem is brought home by an emphasis on the framing devices that characterize conventional forms of speech such as the sonnet, the eulogy, the love letter, the Latin quote or the legal edict. In the absence of formal markers, recognizing a promise or hyperbolic statement as a joke is a matter of extrapolating the speaker's meaning, or intention, based on factors lying outside the words of the statement itself.
- 9 However, the form of *Love Labour's Lost's* dubious jests may be seen as a help as well as a hindrance. This is because unmeant promises and hyperbolic statements do not automatically fall under the category of jokes. They are perhaps more readily identified as lies, bragging, poetic fancy, or idle threats. In fact, George Puttenham called the hyperbole the "loud lyar" in his quirky classification of traditional figures of speech,⁷ and Quintilian associated jesting with lying.⁸ The many forms of untruthfulness associated with promising and exaggerating allow the play to align ambiguous statements belonging to different realms of discourse, suggesting a possible transference of hermeneutic method from one realm to another.

2. The use of courtroom hermeneutics

- 10 Shakespeare's decision to introduce joking in the form of promises and/or hyperbole allows him to extend the dynamics of jesting to discursive activities normally thought of as serious. These include Petrarchan love poetry, which is based on the hyperbolic image of the woman as a goddess, as well as forms of legal discourse involving a threat of disproportionate punishment as a deterrent to crime. The play in fact illustrates the kind of mental gymnastics by which these figures can serve as a gateway from one realm of discourse to another. In particular, the mercurial nature of hyperbole is underscored by its subtle transference from a realm where it is to be expected – love poetry – to one where it is not, i.e. legal language. When Longaville attempts to rationalize his deviation from his vow not to associate with women, he argues that as

his lady is a goddess, and not a woman, he hasn't broken his vow (IV.iii.56-57). This relocation of Petrarchan hyperbole to the quasi-legal realm of formal oaths may be taken as the character's sophistry, but it also suggests the possibility of importing hermeneutic patterns from one realm to another. In particular, the play's use of hyperbole and broken promises suggests that means of establishing intention in the courtroom may also apply to the interpretation of jokes.

- 11 The problem of assessing intention was in fact a topical one when Shakespeare was writing *Love's Labour's Lost*, in particular in the realm of the law. As scholars such as Lorna Hutson, Charles Spinosa and Luke Wilson have pointed out, establishing intention was an increasingly central concern in legal practice, appearing in at least three late sixteenth-century developments.⁹ The first of these developments was the new prominence of actions of *assumpsit*, meaning "he undertook" or "he promised", by which private deals were framed as contracts, or promises to deliver, as opposed to immediately effective transfers of goods. The second, relating to criminal trials, was the practice of encoding criminal intention in the circumstances of the crime, as opposed to associating it with the criminal's actual state of mind. Luke Wilson refers to this development as the "modularity of intention",¹⁰ meaning that intention was now detachable from the individual conscience. The third development was the introduction of the principle of equity into the common law courts. Equity, the principle of mitigating the harshness of the letter of the law in particular cases, was traditionally the precinct of the courts of Chancery. In the sixteenth-century, as Lorna Hutson has shown, Edmund Plowden's *Commentaries* brought equity to the common law, and defined it as a matter of establishing the lawmaker's original intention.¹¹ The three developments established intention – both the defendant and the lawmaker's – as a crucial elements in legal practice, but also as something to be reconstructed, or retrospectively imagined. Of the three developments, I would argue that the principle of equity is the most relevant to *Love's Labour's Lost*.
- 12 In the play, the principle of equity, though not evoked explicitly, seems to underpin the way laws, edicts and proclamations are enforced. The harshness of the law is systematically mitigated, as when the clause about women losing their tongues is forgotten, or when the year-long penalty for consorting with a woman is reduced from a year to a week, then to a few hours in Costard's case. However, the actual workings of equity are illustrated in less obvious places as well. Berowne's somewhat sophisticated analysis of the purpose of the edict he is so reluctant to sign appears as something of a parody of the intellectual process behind the practice of equity.

BEROWNE. What is the end of study, let me know?
 KING. Why, that to know which else we should not know.
 BEROWNE. Things hid and barred, you mean, from common sense?
 KING. Ay, that is study's god-like recompense.
 BEROWNE. Come on then, I will swear to study so
 To know the thing I am forbid to know:
 And thus, to study well where I may dine,
 When I to feast expressly am forbid;
 Or study where to meet some mistress fine,
 When mistresses from common sense are hid;
 Or having sworn too hard-a-keeping oath,
 Study to break it and not break my troth.
 I.i.55-66

With this Socratic line of questioning, Berowne is – facetiously – attempting to replace the letter of the law with its spirit, or original intention. He is arguing that the spirit of the law is the promotion of study, and that the method used to reach that goal – corresponding to the letter of the law – is irrelevant. This is the legal principle of *pro bono publico* or “the public good”, by which the broader purpose of a law trumps its specific provisions. The irony, here, is that Berowne is reconstructing original intention in the presence of the framer, the King himself, rather, as in equitable reconstruction, than compensating for the framer’s absence with an act of imaginative extrapolation. This, of course, draws attention to the necessarily fictitious dimension of equitable reconstruction, and to its performative nature.

3. Performance as the arbitrator of intention

- 13 The fictitious dimension of equitable reconstruction is apparent in Edmund Plowden’s explanation of how equity is applied by the judiciary:

And in order to form a right judgement when the letter of a Statute is restrained, and when enlarged, by Equity, it is a good Way, when you peruse a Statute, to suppose that the Law-maker is present, and that you have asked him the Question you want to know touching the Equity, then you must give yourself such an Answer as you imagine he would have done, if he had been present.¹²

In Plowden’s instructions, as has often been noted,¹³ the judge is being asked to reconstruct the lawmaker’s intention by what amounts to turning him into a dramatic character, and placing him in a scene with himself. This dramatization of the legal text highlights the similarity between a judge working his way back to the lawmaker’s original intention and a reader of a play attempting to assess a character’s tone, meaning the way he or she intends his or her words to be taken. It is a truism that a character has no existence outside of the dramatic text. This is not strictly true of the legislator, who once lived, but for all intents and purposes, the lawmaker is only present in the text of the law. In both cases, it is to be noted, intention is established in the shift from text to performance. Yet this requires some discussion of the possible meanings of “performance”.

- 14 As Luke Wilson reminds us,¹⁴ Shakespeare was writing at a time when the word “performance” was shifting from its promissory to its theatrical meaning. The terms refer respectively to “performing what one has promised to do”, and “performing a play”. When it comes to determining whether a promise is to be taken at face value or as a joke, both meanings are relevant. To illustrate the way performance clarifies intention in the promissory sense, we may adduce the example of the Princess’s hunting expedition. The ambiguity created by the Princess’ equivocation about her intention to hit the deer is definitively lifted in the next scene, when a dialogue between Holofernes and Nathaniel conveys the information that the Princess has indeed performed the act of bringing down the deer. Yet the proximity of the promissory and the theatrical meanings of “performance” suggests that *dramatic* performance may be another way of establishing intention. If we now turn to the eavesdropping scene (IV.iii.1-210), in which the lords overhear each other reading their love sonnets out loud, and compare it with the one in which the ladies read the same sonnets in silence (V.ii.1-78), we may note a hermeneutic discordance. When the young

men hear and watch each other performing the sonnets, they are immediately convinced of their sincerity. However, when the young ladies read the sonnets, they dismiss them as “hypocrisy” (V.ii.31) and “pleasant jest” (V.ii.754). Of course, the young men’s performance is of words they have written themselves. The situation is different for actors or stage directors, for whom performance involves interpretative choices. Such interpretative activity, the play emphasizes, is ultimately a matter of projecting values, a matter of ethics.

- 15 The connection between jokes and ethics goes back at least to Cicero. Though Cicero’s *De Oratore* does not explicitly link joking with values, the connection was implicit in his use of jokes in the courtroom. As Anthony Corbeill points out in *Controlling Laughter*, jokes “simultaneously creat[ed] and enforc[ed] the community’s ethical values”.¹⁵ This seems to follow naturally from Cicero’s discussion of jesting in *De Oratore*, where he described “deformity”¹⁶ as the most laugh-worthy object. For Cicero, physical deformity reflected moral deformity, so that laughter was seen as the natural response to ugliness and immorality. The implication was that in order to laugh together, people needed to agree about what was ugly or immoral. This connection between laughter and a shared ethics also implies that ambiguous jokes reflect conflicting values.
- 16 In the play, ambiguous expressions of intention are connected with shifting or problematic values, in particular through contextual or topical allusions. One example is the Princess’s profession of pity for the deer she is about to kill and her description of herself as a “murderer” (IV.i.8). The Princess explicitly relates her own equivocation to the paradoxical standards of her society, in which “shooting well is [...] accounted ill” (IV.i.25). In this instance, as Edward Berry and Matthew Cartmill have pointed out, the world of the play mirrors Elizabethan society, with its contending and conflicting attitudes towards hunting. Both critics have linked the Princess’s expression of pity for the hunted animal with George’s Gascoigne’s *Art of Venerie*, each section of which is prefaced by a poem in the animal’s voice, complaining about the cruelty of man. The Hart’s preface is a case in point:

I am the Harte, by Greekes surnamed so
 Bicause my heade, doth with their tearmes agree
 For stately shape, fewe such on earth do go,
 So that by right, they have so termed mee.
 For Kings delight, it seemes I was ordeyned
 Whose huntsmen yet, pursue me day by day,
 In Forest, chace and Park, I am constrained,
 Before their Houndes, to wander many away.
 Wherefore who lyst, to learne the perfect trade,
 Of Venerie: and therewithall would knowe,
 What properties, and vertues nature made,
 In one (poore Hart, oh harmlesse Hart) to growe,
 Let him giue ear, to skilfull *Trystam*’s lore,
 To *Phoebus*, *Fowylloux*, and many more.¹⁷

- 17 Significantly, though, Berry and Cartmill disagree about whether these poems should be taken as the author’s expression of compassion for hunted game, or as a joke. In Berry’s words:

Although Matt Cartmill (*A View to a Death in the Morning*; 82-83) suggests that the device might have been intended as a joke, and therefore might imply no sympathy for the animals themselves, Gascoigne’s ambiguous social position

and his cynicism toward war are more likely to have made him genuinely ambivalent about the very art that he describes.¹⁸

Such ethical tensions, in a given culture, may be a prelude to a paradigm shift, a change in the culture's values. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, choosing dubious promises as the template for tonal indeterminacy allows Shakespeare to emphasize the time gap between statement of intent and performance, and to associate that time gap with axiological change. A hint of this connection between changing times and changing values appears in Berowne's excuse for the lords' failure to perform the promise inscribed in the edict. When unmasked by Costard's production of his love letter to Rosaline, Berowne cries out: "young blood doth not obey an old decree" (IV.iii.208). The statement is somewhat paradoxical, given that the "old decree" was made only days previously, by the lords themselves, when they were necessarily even younger than they are now.¹⁹ Though Berowne here seems to be opposing youthful vigour and austere age, he is also measuring the time elapsed between the framing of a law and its enforcement in terms of change, and asserting the primacy of the new order. This awareness of changing values is implicit in Plowden's definition of equity, which we will now briefly return to.

- 18 Returning to Plowden's text, we may wonder how the method is to be applied. What, in particular, is implied by imagining "what [the lawmaker] would have done, had he been here"? Is the judge supposed to imagine the lawmaker stepping out of his historical era decked out in old-fashioned clothes, speech and values, or is he to imagine a spruced up and updated version of the lawmaker more in tune with the times? Should the judge extract the original lawmaker's standards and apply them to the circumstances of the case, or is he expected to imagine what the lawmaker would have said had he been alive "today" and thus presumably partaken of the new standards of the time? This is a problem routinely confronted in American law, where Supreme Court Justices have introduced the concept of "evolving standards of decency"²⁰ in order to make the original intent of the framers of the constitution compatible with changing mores. No such teleological concept existed in Shakespeare's day, yet an awareness of the contingency of religious and moral values existed, as expressed, for example, in Montaigne's "Apologie de Raymond de Sebonde".²¹ Let us note that Plowden's phrasing is sufficiently vague to accommodate a conception of equitable reconstruction that involves some degree of projection.
- 19 A hint that projection is similarly appropriate when assessing jokes appears near the end of the play when Rosaline tells Berowne that "a jest's propensity lies in the ear/ Of him that hears it, never in the tongue/ Of him that makes it" (V.ii.829-831). This can be taken as a meta-dramatic hint that the audience is the ultimate arbitrator of whether a statement is to be taken as a joke or not. The audience's response will of course be mediated by the stage manager's choices and the actor's performance. These in turn will be highly affected by the times and mores of the culture presenting the performance.
- 20 Though we can only guess, it seems inevitable that the tone of *Love's Labour's Lost* was intrinsically different in the late sixteenth-century from what it is in performances today. For example, Berowne's semi-Petrarchan conceit about "Love's Tyburn" (IV.iii.46) would probably have carried darker undertones at a time when public hangings were routinely carried out, just as his remark about the plague (V.ii.421) would have spoken to real fears in the audience, at a time when the disease was still a frequent

caller to London. One speculates that as Western society moved towards a “kinder, gentler” set of values and realities, jokes about brutal death would lose their sting and the “pleasant comedy” would become even more pleasant.

- 21 It is thus inevitable that our interpretation of ambiguous jokes should involve a degree of projection. In deciding whether or not to take a statement as a joke, audiences must choose among a cornucopia of axiological frameworks, including, perhaps overwhelmingly, the dominant values of their own culture. The play’s emphasis on making the recipient the arbitrator of intention lends certain legitimacy to the audience’s semi-instinctive projection of the standards of their own time and culture onto the text of the play. By our standards, Longaville must be joking about cutting out women’s tongues, because he is characterized as a pleasant young man and pleasant young men don’t believe in maiming women. Similarly, the Princess must be joking about “enduring a thousand torments” because after all, she is a lively lady and lively ladies don’t go in for martyrdom.
- 22 And yet, as we have seen, the play does not entirely let us get away with these glib assumptions. At least the written text does not, though a sufficiently upbeat production may²². A sense of lingering discomfort hovers over these doubtful jests thanks in part to the play’s generic indeterminacies. Thus even as the play authorizes a soft reading, in which characters behave as they would in our own culture, it reminds us that what is clearly a joke in one set of circumstances may become dead serious in even only slightly altered circumstances. Longaville’s contribution to the proclamation, in particular, is a reminder that given the right circumstances, a well-spoken young man may be capable of unspeakable acts.
- 23 The play thus emphasizes the contingency of a joke’s effect, in a departure from the stance taken by most Renaissance treatises on jesting. Most of these, including Balthazar Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*, and Thomas Wilson’s *Art of Rhetoric*, take up Cicero’s rules and examples as if they were timeless and universal. As Barbara Bowen points out, “considering how un-funny most of Cicero’s *facetiae* are, we wonder why so many of them survived unchanged through the Renaissance”.²³ This “recycling of Ciceronian jokes”,²⁴ as Bowen calls it, is consistent with the backward and imitative thrust of humanist writing, and with the resulting temptation to evade the issue of axiological change. In contrast, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, with its foreign visitors and ghostly fathers, exhibits an awareness of other times and other places, and the hermeneutic difficulty of communicating across cultural lines.
- 24 Shakespeare’s use of ambiguous joking in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* offers an illustration of the definition of a play as “a mirror held up to nature” quite different from that evoked in *Hamlet*, a play written about seven years later. In Shakespeare’s most famous tragedy, the eponymous Prince of Denmark explained that a play was a chronicle of the time (II.ii.515). This is consistent with the tragic genre, and its close association with historical time. In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, however, Shakespeare suggests that a play may act as a mirror of the audience’s time. *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, then, is “a mirror held up nature”, but one that moves beyond the topicality of satire, or even the universality of moral allegory, and is made to mirror the values of whatever culture its director and audience belong to, while exposing those values as both contingent and brittle.

NOTES

1. William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. H.R.Woudhuysen, London and New York, Bloomsbury, Introduction, p. 97.
2. *Ibid.*
3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Complete Works*, eds. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 2nd edition, Oxford, OUP, 2005.
4. All quotations from *Love's Labour's Lost* are from the New Cambridge Shakespeare, ed. William C. Carroll, Cambridge, CUP, 2009.
5. Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, Loeb, 1920-1922, book 6, chapter 3, sections 21 and 67, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Quintilian/Institutio_Oratoria/6C*.html#3 (last accessed February 21st, 2015). Quintilian quotes Cicero's *locus classicus* about the man so tall he hit his head on the arch of Fabius.
6. Cicero, *De Oratore*, sections 240-248.
7. George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, London, Richard Field, 1589, Book 3, Yij, p. 159, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.proxy-scd.u-bourgogne.fr/>, image 81 (last accessed February 19th, 2015).
8. *Op.Cit.*, section 6.
9. See for example Luke Wilson, *Theaters of Intention, Drama and Law in Early Modern England*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, and Charles Spinosa, "The Transformation of Intentionality: Debt and Contract in *The Merchant of Venice*", *English Literary Renaissance*, vol.24, issue 2, March 1994, p. 370-409.
10. Luke Wilson, "Hamlet, Hale vs. Petit and the Hysteresis of Action", *English Literary Renaissance*, Vol.60, n°1 (Spring, 1993), p.17-55, p.28.
11. See Lorna Hutson, "Not the King's Two Bodies", in *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Victoria Kahn & Lorna Hutson, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2002, p.168-169.
12. Edmund Plowden, *The Commentaries, or Reports of Edmund Plowden (1571)*, His Majesty's Law Printers, London, 1779, p. 467.
13. See for example Peter G. Platt, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox*, Farnam and Burlington, Ashgate, 2009, p. 136.
14. See Wilson, in Kahn & Hutson, ch.4, "Promissory Performances", p. 165-183.
15. Anthony Corbeill, *Political Humour in the Late Roman Republic*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 6.
16. Cicero, *De Oratore*, Book 2, section 239.
17. George Gascoigne, *The Noble Arte of Venerie (1575)*, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com.proxy-scd.u-bourgogne.fr/> (last accessed February 19th, 2015).
18. Edward Berry, *Shakespeare and the Hunt*, Cambridge, CUP, 2001, p. 28.
19. Here we seem to have yet another instance of what Patricia Parker has identified as a "preposterous" pattern running through the play. See Patricia Parker, "Preposterous Reversals: *Love's Labour's Lost*", *MLQ*, December 1993: 435-482.
20. The phrase was first used by Chief Justice Earl Warren in 1958, and has since become part of the jurisprudence of the Eighth Amendment, forbidding "cruel and unusual" punishment.
21. See Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais (1580)*, Paris, Le livre de poche, 2001, p. 692-705.
22. In Kenneth Branagh's lively 2000 screen adaptation, for example, the possibility of discomfort arising from Longaville's mutilation clause is obviated by over-the-top histrionics, with the actor playing Longaville grimacing and wiggling his fingers in mock horror-movie style.
23. Barbara C. Bowen, *Humor and Humanism in the Renaissance*, Aldershot (UK) and Burlington (VT), Ashgate, 2004, p. 419.

24. *Ibid.*

 ABSTRACTS

Berowne's feeble defense, when challenged by the King, that his vow to fast and remain celibate for three years at the court of Navarre was made "in jest" (I.i.54) ushers in a pattern of authorial obfuscation concerning whether characters' statements are to be taken at face value or as jokes. Though Shakespeare withholds conclusive textual evidence, such indeterminacies cannot easily be shrugged off as "*hors-texte*", as they are given prominence in the play by providing backbone to the plot, which can broadly be read as the women's attempt to gauge the young men's seriousness and reliability, and also through alignment with contemporary legal debates around the issues of criminal intention and equity. With its invocation of courtroom hermeneutics, the play suggests that performative reconstruction is the key to establishing a fictional speaker's intention. Such reconstruction, in the playhouse as in the courtroom, implies a projection of new standards onto an old text. Ultimately, then, *Love's Labour's Lost's* dubious jests highlight the contingency of moral values, and their fragility.

Lorsque le roi de Navarre rappelle à Berowne qu'il a juré de passer trois années de jeune et de célibat à la cour, celui-ci répond que ce serment n'était que simple boutade. Sur le même modèle, on relève dans la pièce une récurrence d'énoncés dont le niveau de sérieux est difficile à jauger. Si le texte ne permet pas de trancher, ces ambiguïtés ne peuvent pas non plus être reléguées au « hors-texte », dans la mesure où la pièce les met en exergue, d'abord en les associant au mouvement de l'intrigue (qu'on peut assimiler aux efforts déployés par les quatre jeunes femmes pour éprouver le sérieux des jeunes lords), mais aussi en les rapportant aux discussions juridiques de l'époque portant sur l'intention criminelle et sur l'équité. Par son invocation de l'herméneutique juridique, la pièce laisse entendre que c'est à travers un processus de reconstruction qu'apparaît l'intention du locuteur. Que ce soit au tribunal ou au théâtre, une telle reconstruction sous-entend une projection de normes nouvelles sur un texte ancien. En définitive, les plaisanteries ambiguës de *Love's Labour's Lost* mettent en évidence la contingence des valeurs morales, ainsi que leur fragilité.

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Mots-clés: Peines d'amour perdues, boutade, équité, représentation, éthique, promesse, hyperbole

Keywords: jesting, joking, equity, performance, ethics, Love's Labour's Lost, hyperbole

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