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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/3305>

DOI: 10.4000/shakespeare.3305

ISSN: 2271-6424

Publisher

Société Française Shakespeare

Electronic reference

Andy Mousley, « Love in *Love's Labour's Lost*: Ontological Foundation or Laughing Matter? », *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* [Online], 32 | 2015, Online since 10 March 2015, connection on 24 July 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/3305> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/shakespeare.3305>

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Love in *Love's Labour's Lost*: Ontological Foundation or Laughing Matter?

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- 1 The domain of folly in *Love's Labour's Lost* is an ever-expanding domain in which love plays the leading role.¹ Folly is so pervasive in the play that it verges on becoming an existential statement. What makes the world go round is not love or money or power or the desire for knowledge, but folly. We may chase after these desirables, but if we look back over our shoulder we will probably see folly not far behind, laughing at us for one or another foolish impulse which is driving our endeavour, whether we know it or not. As Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* makes clear, folly appears in different guises and has several friends and associates, one being self-love:

Is there any duty throughout life which you can perform [asks Folly], unless you have Self-love at hand to help you, Self-love who is so prompt to take my place on all occasions that she is rightly called my sister? What is so foolish as self-satisfaction and self-admiration? But then what agreeable, pleasant or graceful act can you perform if you aren't self-satisfied?²

- 2 Characteristically, Erasmus's Folly does not deliver a simple or single message, safe from the ambivalences of irony and paradox. Does the folly of narcissistic self-love and self-admiration only make us laughable and ridiculous, or does this form of folly serve some necessary and important purpose? Without any shred of self-love, life would quickly become unbearable. Yet, self-admiration can easily make fools of us. Whatever wisdom may ultimately be redeemed from folly, an awareness of the ubiquity of folly as folly gives rise to the humbling perspective that human existence is cause for laughter, mirth and ridicule. 'Humour', argues the philosopher Simon Critchley, 'recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic *acknowledgement*, not Promethean authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity'.³ The only earnest message of comedy, at least from this

perspective on humour, is *not* to be too earnest, and especially perhaps, when it comes to affairs of the heart and the foundational certainties that the heart seeks.

- 3 As I have argued elsewhere, Shakespearean comedy does not entirely banish seriousness, but this is hard-won and pitted against the comic injunction *not* to take ourselves and our desire for foundations and certainties over-seriously.⁴ This is one of the ways comedy typically orients us towards human life. In tragedy, we are made to feel the removal of firm foundations intensely, as loss. In *Othello*, for example, Othello's jealous mind anxiously inhabits the gap between perception and reality: 'By the world', he says to Iago, 'I think my wife be honest, and think she is not. / I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.'⁵ The dream of transparency, whereby one consciousness is so umbilically joined to another that communication seems redundant, is ruined by jealousy and the green-eyed monster's insinuation that we might, after all, be strangers to one another. In comedy, however, certainty is more often than not mocked and uncertainty embraced. It is the way of the comic world, for example, to make category errors whereby inauthentic passions and urges get mistaken for authentic ones. Out of this irreverently treated confusion can come clarification as well as seriousness, but seriousness is not as immediately acceptable in the comic universe as it is in the tragic one. Those who wax prematurely serious about the nature of love, for example, are likely to be seen as pontificators. In comedy, earnestness has to be earned. The only unqualified seriousness that comedy allows is once again *not* to take ourselves seriously. Only with that premise in place can other serious conclusions follow.
- 4 In *Love's Labour's Lost*, ridicule's net expands to include virtually all of the characters in the play. Even those characters who themselves *ridicule* are in turn ridiculed for counting themselves *above* ridicule. The scene which in particular demonstrates folly's gradual colonisation of the world of the play is the one in which one courtier after another achieves comic ascendancy only for his position of superiority to be immediately overturned. Having collectively foresworn love, each courtier (predictably) falls in love and is (equally predictably) found out. The (unpredictable) method of finding out nicely ridicules the ridiculer and turns the one-upmanship of ego humour into a shared recognition of our 'laughable inauthenticity', to recall Simon Critchley's phrase. First the King comes onstage to read his love sonnet alone – or so he thinks – and then stands aside to overhear Longueville do exactly the same. This pattern is repeated and so, too, is the subsequent exposure of one courtier by another. Longueville steps forward to tell Dumaine that 'I should blush, I know, / To be o'erheard and taken napping so', only for the King to use Longueville's own words to shame Longueville himself: 'Come sir, you blush. As his, your case is such. / You chide at him, offending twice as much'.⁶
- 5 The figure who has overseen and overheard everything without yet being exposed is Biron, whose scorn is significantly more vitriolic than the previous two expositors of folly. Where Longueville and the King talk about being shamed in terms of blushing, Biron talks about whipping and hypocrisy: 'Now step I forth to whip hypocrisy.' (IV.iii.149). Biron's aggressive Juvenalian satire makes a proverbial mountain out of a molehill. It makes a catastrophe of folly. By contrast, the thought that the appropriate response to being found out is 'merely' to blush normalises folly. Folly is cause for 'only human' comic embarrassment rather than tragedy. Biron, as the King points out, has struck the wrong tone; his 'jest' is too 'bitter' (IV.iii.172).

- 6 Blushing also feminises the courtiers, because blushing has conventionally been associated with femininity.⁷ The levelling principle of comedy applies to gender identities, and perhaps especially to gender identities in Shakespeare's comedies, because gender hierarchies are overturned by virtue of women being designated, for reasons which will become clear, as *custodians* of the human. Women are in other words placed in important roles *above* men as salvagers of threatened human values or resources. One area to which this clearly applies is love. But it also applies to folly and the recognition of folly. The courtiers need to recognise that folly is normal, that they are foolish to think that they are immune from it, and that folly is not cause for the kind of moral panic that the scourge Biron thinks it is. Biron's moment of triumph is in any case short-lived as his love is in turn exposed and he is himself levelled by folly: 'I confess, I confess ... That you three fools lacked me fool to make up the mess.' (IV.iii. 203-5). Thus folly, as I suggested earlier, fast becomes the existential norm rather than exception, such that, as C. L. Barber puts it in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959): 'in the classic manner of Erasmus in his *Praise of Folly*, it becomes folly not to be a fool'.⁸
- 7 But here we need to return to the question: what kind of fool? As both Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* and Shakespeare's plays demonstrate, there are fools and fools, wise and otherwise.⁹ Following the lead of the aphorism quoted by Touchstone in *As You Like It* that 'The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool',¹⁰ we could say that the wise fool knows that humans are prone to folly, is able to laugh at himself, recognises his own limits (and the limits of human beings in general) and is aware that claims to authenticity and knowledge can be, at best, premature, and at worst, permanently unrealistic. However, Touchstone's aphorism can be understood as not simply *inverting* the categories of wisdom and folly, but as *confusing* them, for it suggests, as is common in Shakespeare, that things are not always as they may seem. One thing – wisdom – may be or may become an entirely different thing – folly. But that different thing may then morph into something else. In the Shakespearean universe, categories are de-stabilised, and not simply inverted. In such a topsy-turvy world, what counts as foolish and worthy of ridicule, on the one hand, and wise and worthy of serious attention on the other, may not always be clear-cut. So when and where are we to take love's fools in *Love's Labour's Lost* seriously? Under what conditions do these fools for love qualify for earnest treatment? Is their courtship mere 'lining to the time' (V.ii.773), as the Queen later calls it, or is there some serious point to it? We might be tempted, early on, to level such earnest accusations at the courtiers as: they are shallow and depthless, they have learnt all their love lore from not very good love poetry and consequently know little or nothing about the realities of loving. But such accusations, though valid, may seem untimely and unseasonable. Would only a fool who thinks himself wise, like the pedant Holofernes, spoil the festive spirit in the name of such sobering truths? When is the right moment, if ever there is one, to unmask the foolish illusions of human beings and identify the truth that they seem unable to fathom?
- 8 When the scholars turned lovers in *Love's Labour's Lost* find out that each one of them has forsworn their vow to devote themselves exclusively to the life of the mind, they turn to Biron to justify their about-turn. 'Now prove / Our loving lawful', says the King 'and our faith not torn'. Dumaine follows suit: 'Ay, marry there, some flattery for this evil' and Longueville in similar vein pleads for 'some authority how to proceed, / Some tricks, some quilllets how to cheat the devil' (IV.iii.282-86). Some fake, trumped-up *show* of authority, based on 'tricks' and 'quilllets' (meaning quibbles) will do, it seems. Some

illusion of authority is all that is required because uppermost in the courtiers' minds is the imperative not to lose face. At the same time, there is a sophisticated knowingness on the part of the courtiers of the fact that their faces are faces which are continually at risk of being seen through and which might in fact be interesting to lose, or at least to contemplate losing. Why interesting? Because to put identity at risk is to create suspense, and in the case of romantic comedy, to create the conditions for play and foreplay. Part of the flirtatious banter which occurs between the two principal groups is a form of verbal striptease in which a covering or disguise is unveiled, only for another layer to stand in the way of complete nakedness.

- 9 When the courtiers disguise themselves as Russians, for the benefit of the women who are themselves masked, appearances are layered one on top of another:

ROSALINE: How many weary steps,
Of many weary miles you have o'ergone,
Are numbered in the travel of one mile?
BIRON: We number nothing that we spend for you.
Our duty is so rich, so infinite,
That we may do it still without account.
Vouchsafe to show the sunshine of your face,
That we, like savages, may worship it.
ROSALINE: My face is but a moon, and clouded too.
KING: Blessed are clouds, to do as such clouds do.
Vouchsafe, bright moon, and these thy stars, to shine,
Those clouds removed, upon our watery eyne.
ROSALINE: O vain petitioner, beg a greater matter!
Thou now requests but moonshine in the water.
(V.ii.194-207)

- 10 Beneath the appearance of the Russian is Biron the courtier speaking romantic clichés about the dazzling appearance he imagines seeing beneath the mask worn by Rosaline who then exposes the revelation desired by the courtiers as insubstantial: nothing but 'moonshine in the water'. These are 'sign[s] of she' to borrow a phrase of Biron's, not the 'she herself' (V.ii.468-9). But the comedic play of signs, replete with mistaken identities, category errors, and metaphorically missing persons have kindled the fires of desire at the same time as they have opened love to playful uncertainty. For underneath one 'sign of she' may be another sign, and then another, *ad infinitum*. It is a relatively easy and obvious point to make that the courtiers routinely replace the actual objects of their devotion with clichéd, textual versions of them, versions which are more in keeping with the bookish ways they are supposed to have relinquished than with 'real life'. But this kind of unmasking once again seems untimely. To appeal soberly to some 'real' Rosaline beneath the signs she is taken or mistaken for does not seem, at this point in the play, the right kind of move. The festive spirit of the play makes any such quest for 'reality', 'truth', 'authenticity' and foundations seem inappropriately, or to recall the phrase I used earlier, unseasonably leaden. Yes, it is true, that the romantic illusions of the men are habitually punctured by the women, but simple oppositions between appearance and reality, illusion and truth, authenticity and inauthenticity, the substantial and the insubstantial, the disembodied and the down-to-earth, are not immediately enforced. After Rosaline has wittily implied that the courtiers' romantic idealisations are empty, instead of ending the dance of words

and signs whose relation to reality is no doubt always in doubt, she begins another 'game of wit':

ROSALINE: O vain petitioner, beg a greater matter!
 Thou now requests but moonshine in the water.
 KING: Then in our measure do but vouchsafe one change
 Thou bid'st me beg; this begging is not strange
 ROSALINE: Play music, then! *[Music plays]* Nay, you must do it soon.
 Not yet? No dance! Thus change I like the moon.
 (V.ii.207-11)

- 11 Rosaline is not, at this stage, a killjoy. She does not want the play to stop in the name of some sobering truth about who she really is. What she wants is better and faster play, play that moves the game of love beyond the tired, worn-out clichés wittingly or unwittingly recycled by the courtiers. In a trice, Rosaline asks for dance music, demands an instant response - 'you must do it soon' - then immediately cancels the request as if to suggest that the courtiers are just too sluggish, too slow off the mark. If there is to be a *play* of appearances, a comedy of mistaken or half-mistaken identities, then let that play be more fleet-footed and energetic, with a view, perhaps, to exhausting itself more quickly than at the slower pace set by the men.
- 12 The guises and disguises of lovers are not so much unmasked in the name of truth, then, as transformed into different faces. What applies to the ostensible objects of the lovers' devotions also applies to love itself. For love itself rapidly changes face. It changes hue just as quickly as the scholars-turned-lovers-turned-Russians do. Love is a gallimaufry of infatuation, idolatry, tyranny, narcissism, compassion, folly, blindness, madness, drunkenness, giddiness, religion, fine feeling and agent of civilisation. When Biron in Act 3 declares himself in love it is as one who has been smitten by that 'wimpled, whining, purblind, wayward boy ... Dan Cupid':

And I, forsooth, in love! I that have been love's whip,
 A very beadle to a humorous sigh,
 A critic, nay, a night-watch constable,
 A domineering pedant o'er the boy,
 Than whom no mortal so magnificent!
 This wimpled, whining, purblind, wayward boy.
 This Signor Junior, giant dwarf, Dan Cupid
 Regent of love-rhymes, lord of all folded arms,
 Th'anointed sovereign of sighs and groans [...] *[...]* O my little heart!
 And I to be corporal of his field
 And wear his colours like a tumbler's hoop!
 (III.i.169-83)

- 13 Love here is folly, and unambiguously so, it seems, with no redeemable wisdom about it, as far as Biron is concerned. Yet called upon a few scenes later to justify the courtiers' disavowal of their life of scholarship, Biron rises to the occasion by venerating love and turning it into a form of religion:

[Love] adds a precious seeing to the eye –
 A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind.
 A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound
 When the suspicious head of theft is stopped.
 Love's feeling is more soft and sensible

Than are the tender horns of cockled snails. [...]
 And when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods
 Make heaven drowsy with the harmony.
 Never durst poet touch a pen to write
 Until his ink were tempered with Love's sighs.
 O, then his lines would ravish savage ears,
 And plant in tyrants mild humility.
 From women's eyes this doctrine I derive:
 They sparkle still the right Promethean fire;
 They are the books, the arts, the academes,
 That show, contain, and nourish all the world,
 Else none at all in aught proves excellent.
 (IV.iii.309-30)

- 14 Biron's command of words is such that he can do what he will with them, here re-creating the meaning of love as occasion demands, in response to Longueville's plea to Biron to conjure up 'some authority how to proceed, / Some tricks, some quillets, how to cheat the devil' (IV.iii.285-6). Here, then, is another appearance, or so it might seem, except for the fact that at some indeterminate point or another, we might become weary of the endless substitution of one signifier of love for another. We might begin to want more substance, and probably at the prompting of characters (like Rosaline, for example) who play, but play semi-seriously, with a view to discriminating between more or less substantial and more or less shallow appeals to love. And perhaps Biron's speech does not itself present just another 'appearance' of love. Perhaps we might say, in imitation of the play's own propensity for paradox, that what Biron's speech offers is a 'seeming appearance', an appearance masquerading as a profound reality about love but one which might have some truth to it. As is well-known, rhetorical training in the Renaissance involved arguing *in utramque partem*, either side of a case. As Aristotle and subsequent theorists of rhetoric proposed, rhetoric produced knowledge that was probable rather than certain. Rhetorical love - love subjected to continuous rhetorical treatment - is in danger in *Love's Labour's Lost* of becoming empty love, love in which style reigns permanently over substance, manner over matter, eloquence over wisdom. Yet the 'sweet smoke of rhetoric' (III.i.61), including amorous rhetoric, which is clearly the object of the play's satire is not always and only an object of ridicule, for there is sometimes just enough 'probability' in what is said about love to make us wonder what truths might lie hidden or half-hidden in the play's various rhetorical excursions.
- 15 To talk about matters of truth and substance is of course to wax metaphysical. The universalising, foundation-seeking cast of thinking that is bound up with metaphysics has not been in favour amongst culturally-inclined, historically-minded critics over the last forty years. Yet the play nudges its way towards the 'seriousness' of a foundation-seeking philosophy of love even as it subjects love and lovers to mockery, and mediates its metaphysics through the dialogic, 'probabilising' conduits of drama and rhetoric. Another way of thinking about these questions is to suggest that there are two comic registers operating in tandem in *Love's Labour's Lost*: one festive, mocking, 'light', playful and deflating of attempts upon seriousness; the other - more of a narrative structure than a register - seeking clarification amidst the topsy-turvy world of illusions and misperceptions also inherent to comedy. As C. L. Barber, Northrop Frye and others have recognised, comedy can be a plot structure which is also a ritualistic patterning of experience, leading from confusion to clarification, or from the destruction of selves through ridicule and mayhem to the tentative renewal of them.¹¹

- 16 Biron himself uses the language of self-loss and self-renewal – ‘Let us once lose our oaths to find ourselves, / Or else we lose ourselves to keep our oaths’ (IV.iii.338-9). In so doing, he nudges the play into becoming an existential quest-narrative, whereby an inauthentic self is shed in favour of a more authentic one, and the superficialities to which lovers are prone are cast aside to reveal a deeper wisdom about love. For all Biron’s verbal showmanship, which in festive manner releases language from the necessity of ‘meaning’, the other comedic register present in the play is invoked in this *semi-serious* quest for renewal and rebirth. I emphasise *semi-serious* because Biron’s grandiose elevation of love can be simultaneously read as a mock-elevation. The doubling of comic perspective means that we are again made to wonder when we should begin to weigh love’s claims. Has Biron yet proved himself worthy to be taken seriously? Has he earned the right to be earnest?
- 17 It is not easy to say exactly when or where we should begin asking such truth-questions about love as: is love de-sublimated as sexual desire, ‘flesh’ made ‘deity’ (IV.iii.71-3), as Biron puts it, the truth about love? Or is the neo-platonised version of love he invokes in his later speech the truth that gives the lie to the reductive materialism of the flesh? Love, so Biron claims, deepens perception, adding ‘a precious seeing to the eye’ (IV.iii.309); it sensitises – ‘Love’s feeling is [...] soft and sensitive’ (IV.iii.313); love also civilises, ravishing ‘savage ears’ (IV.iii.324); it humbles by planting ‘in tyrants mild humility’ (IV.iii.325) and brings ‘harmony’ (IV.iii.321). Are these all throw-away lines which affirm nothing but the extensiveness of Biron’s verbal repertoire? Or do some of them make affective and ontological claims upon us? It is tempting to be drawn in by at least some of these apotheoses, such as the idea that ‘love adds a precious seeing to the eye’, for this statement *evokes* a metaphysics of engagement. I emphasise ‘evokes’ because Biron does not spell out what precious seeing might involve. He may fancy himself a philosopher but he is not a systematic one. Nevertheless he hints at a philosophy of love, based upon engagement. To turn the probable knowledge of a foolish lover’s rhetoric into something more substantial I want to turn briefly to one of the most illuminatingly synoptic perspectives on love to have emerged recently, which is that of the philosopher Simon May. ‘If we all have a need to love’, writes May,

it is because we all need to feel at home in the world; to root our life in the here and now; to give our existence solidity and validity; to deepen the sensation of being; to enable us to experience the reality of our life as indestructible (even if we all also accept that our life is temporary and will end in death.)

- 18 May places these various wants and needs under his *ur*-category, ‘ontological rootedness’. The need to feel ontologically rooted can according to May be met in different ways:

At first, home is our mother and father; gradually its possibilities become larger and more complex: they might include our work, our friends, our children, nature, God. Or places, ideas, and ideals. Or contrary to common prejudice – money or status and the people who offer us access to it. For these can powerfully root, even if they are less noble and more obviously instrumental than other objects of love.¹²

- 19 The promise of love, as philosophized by May, is that it acts as a solution to the perplexities, uncertainties and divisions of existence by rooting us and deepening ‘the

sensation of being' as he puts it. May's idea is close to Biron's idea of precious seeing, seeing that is precious because it makes us feel fully engaged in the world rather than at odds with it.

- 20 To begin with, as is common with romantic love, ontological rootedness takes place inside the lover's narcissistic imagination. There is someone, seemingly out there, who makes the world seem less alien, less hostile, and worth living in. But the love object is an image or ideal that exists in the mind of the lover and bears little relation to reality. Narcissistic romantic love and ego-humour, humour designed to bolster the self at the expense of another, go hand in hand in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Both have to be relinquished. The narcissism of love has to be abandoned through the realisation that the romantic perception of the person and the person herself (whoever that might be) may not coincide. And ego-humour, in the case of Biron, has to cede place to humour sensitive to the condition of the sick and the dying. This is the love-test set by Rosaline for Biron, one which now definitely injects seriousness into the 'sport' of the play. Of the many proverbs in *Love's Labour's Lost*, often used glibly – sportively – as possible containers for experience, Rosaline's at the end of the play stands out as one demanding unambiguously serious consideration: 'A jest's prosperity lies in the ear / of him that hears it, never in the tongue / Of him that makes it' (V.ii.847-9). Rosaline's emphasis on reception rather than production instructs Biron that the tellers of jokes are dependent on their listeners, that listeners should be regarded as more than a pair of admiring ears and that this should be reflected in a more intimate knowledge of one's audience/s. Transferred to the domain of love, this means that Biron will need to subject the 'ontological rootedness' that he desires from love to the risk of an actual relationship rather than one that exists in his head. If love is a 'precious seeing' because it engages us meaningfully in and with the world, then this 'seeing' will have to be more attentive, and accept that love beyond narcissism does not come with absolute guarantees.
- 21 The labour of love might have been lost in this comedy if its sole comic mode was festive, but its other comic mode, involving a search for clarification and wisdom, means that love is not only a laughing matter and sign of human folly. We do need to acknowledge the folly of taking ourselves, especially our romantic selves, too seriously, and the play implicitly warns against premature philosophising. Yet the play, especially at the end, lays down conditions for being taken seriously as a lover, and these conditions may then make us seriously – and even anxiously – wonder what remains of love beyond the many appearances it has assumed during the course of the play.
- 22 Injecting another sombre note into the comedy, the Queen has this blunt message for the men:

We have received your letters, full of love,
Your favours, 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.769-76)

- 23 Dumaine's response to this is: 'Our letters ... showed much more than jest' (V.ii.777). 'So did our looks' (V.ii.778) is Longueville's supporting comment. Rosaline's response is

curt: 'We did not quote them so' (V.ii.779). Easy protestations of serious intent are not good enough.

- 24 Here and elsewhere in Shakespeare's plays (Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*, Cordelia as the albeit initially ignored spokeswoman for love in *King Lear*), women are empowered in relation to love and men disempowered. Women are educators, sages and judges and men, novices. While this might be read as reinforcing gender stereotypes by relegating women to a private rather than public sphere of influence, such is the importance of love to worlds that are often presented in Shakespeare's plays (comedies and tragedies alike) as heartless, that to be an arbiter of love is to be significantly empowered. Moreover, love is hardly ever just a private matter between two people, for its significance is constantly being amplified. In the world of Shakespearean comedy, people not only fall in love (or think that they do), they talk about it, reflect upon it, justify their falling in love and expand their self-justifications into heavyweight existential statements. For women to intervene in matters of affection, and stipulate the conditions for being taken seriously as a lover, is therefore to intervene in no 'merely domestic' affair.
- 25 I will conclude by offering a brief word about my method in this paper, in the context of what I see as currently happening in literary studies. We are emerging into a situation in which it is once more possible to talk, provisionally and self-reflexively of course, about the human. For a long time, this did not seem possible. That is because anti-essentialist scepticism towards human universals has been one of the prevailing orthodoxies in the literary academy over the last forty years. History and historically contingent ideologies are taken to shape human consciousness, not the other way round. The 'very idea of a "defining human essence" is precisely what new historicists find vacuous and untenable', wrote Stephen Greenblatt in 1990, and this sentiment is one widely shared by historicist critics, of different hues, both before and after 1990.¹³ Love's labour was therefore itself often lost by hard-line historicists. In 1982, Arthur Marotti wrote what was to become an influential essay called "'Love is not love': Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order". Reversing what he saw as the formalist fallacy of removing texts from their social contexts, Marotti restored the public dimension of putatively private poems and treated 'love' as the medium through which Elizabethan socioeconomic circumstances reveal themselves. 'Love lyrics' writes Marotti, 'could express figuratively the realities of suit, service and recompense with which ambitious men were insistently concerned as well as the frustrations and disappointments experienced in socially competitive environments'.¹⁴ Love is thus treated by Marotti less as a phenomenon in its own right than an epi-phenomenon, a secondary symptom of a cause located elsewhere, in the struggle for position and employment at court.¹⁵ The ostensible subject matter of sonnet sequences, namely love, was thus displaced in Marotti's essay by the 'real' subject matter of the sonnets, namely courtiership and power. But critics and theorists have been turning their attention once more to the human (including the posthuman as an ever-present attendant of the human), and humanisms and the humanities are being variously re-capitulated and re-invented. The question then is *how* literature in general and Shakespeare in particular help us to think about existential questions. What is the specificity of literature in the way that it treats human life? In the case of *Love's Labour's Lost*, as with all literary texts, we have to reckon with form, genre and medium, and with the way its comedy

encourages us to attend to love in distinctive and emotionally complex ways, as the provider simultaneously of mirth, anxiety and seriousness.

NOTES

1. Parts of this current essay are reproduced by kind permission of Edinburgh University Press from Andy Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare* [2007], 2nd edition, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 2015, p. 112-124.
2. Desiderius Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971, p. 94.
3. Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 102.
4. See Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*, *op. cit.*
5. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, in *The Complete Works*, eds. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 2nd edition, Oxford, OUP, 2005, I.iii.388-90.
6. Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, in *The Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, IV.iii.127-30. All subsequent references to the play in this edition are given within the text.
7. For an extended discussion of blushing, including its relevance to gender issues, see Brian Cummings, "Animal Passions and Human Sciences: Shame, Blushing and Nakedness in Early Modern Europe and the New World", in *At the Borders of the Human*, eds. Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert and Susan Wiseman, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1999, p. 28-32.
8. C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1959, p. 92.
9. In Erasmus's text, Christian folly, for example, is wise folly: p. 188-208; scholastic obscurantism is foolish folly: p. 156; and self-love is a combination of both: p. 131-135 and *passim*.
10. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *The Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, V.i.30-1.
11. See, for example, Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 163-186 and *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1965; C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1959; Edward Berry, *Shakespeare's Comic Rites*, Cambridge, CUP, 1984.
12. Simon May, *Love: a History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 6.
13. Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder", in his *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 165.
14. Arthur F. Marotti, "'Love is not Love': Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order", *English Literary History*, 49, 1982, 396-428; 398.
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ABSTRACTS

Love's labour is often lost in Shakespeare's (un)romantic comedy because love is folly and lovers, ridiculous. We know, however, that Shakespeare delights in paradoxes and reversals which alert us to the possibility of finding wisdom in folly and folly in self-professed wisdom. Given the insisted-upon interchangeability of wisdom and folly in Shakespeare's plays, how can we be confident of being able to tell them apart? If lovers are foolish in *Love's Labour's Lost* then what wisdom might there be in their folly? When Biron puts his mind to proving the value of love he makes various grandiose claims. One is that love 'adds a precious seeing to the eye'. Should we treat this as a truth or a seeming truth, a nugget of wisdom about the way love can 'deepen the sensation of being' (Peter May) or just another depthless, well-turned phrase? This paper explores the question of when and under what conditions love can be taken seriously in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Les peines d'amour sont souvent perdues dans la comédie (non)romantique de Shakespeare, car l'amour est folie et les amoureux, ridicules. Toutefois, nous savons que Shakespeare affectionne les paradoxes et les renversements qui nous font prendre conscience que la folie peut receler une part de sagesse et la prétendue sagesse, une part de folie. Étant donné l'interchangeabilité de la sagesse et de la folie dans les pièces de Shakespeare, comment être sûr de pouvoir les distinguer ? Si les amants font preuve de folie dans *Peines d'amour perdues*, alors peut-être y a-t-il une certaine sagesse dans leur folie ? Lorsqu'il s'efforce de prouver la valeur de l'amour, Biron énonce quelques déclarations grandioses, dont une selon laquelle l'amour « donne à l'œil une précieuse seconde vue ». Doit-on voir là une vérité, même partielle, une once de sagesse relative à la façon dont l'amour peut « approfondir la sensation d'être » (Peter May), ou simplement une expression brillante de plus, dépourvue de toute profondeur ? Le présent article explore la question de savoir quand et à quelles conditions l'amour peut être considéré sérieusement dans *Peines d'amour perdues*.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Peines d'amour perdues, amour, comédie, folie, narcissisme, ontologie

Keywords: comedy, folly, love, ontology, self-love, *Love's Labour's Lost*

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