

Love's Labour's Lost

If we were to part with any of the author's comedies, it should be this. Yet we should be loth to part with Don Adriano de Armado, that mighty potentate of nonsense, or his page, that handful of wit; with Nathaniel the curate, or Holofernes the schoolmaster, and their dispute after dinner on 'the golden cadences of poesy'; with Costard the clown, or Dull the constable. Biron is too accomplished a character to be lost to the world, and yet he could not appear without his fellow courtiers and the king: and if we were to leave out the ladies, the gentlemen would have no mistresses. So that we believe we may let the whole play stand as it is, and we shall hardly venture to 'set a mark of reprobation on it'. Still we have some objections to the style, which we think savours more of the pedantic spirit of Shakespeare's time than of his own genius; more of controversial divinity, and the logic of Peter Lombard, than of the inspiration of the Muse. It transports us quite as much to the manners of the court, and the quirks of courts of law, as to the scenes of nature or the fairyland of his own imagination. Shakespeare has set himself to imitate the tone of polite conversation then prevailing among the fair, the witty, and the learned, and he has imitated it but too faithfully. It is as if the hand of Titian had been employed to give grace to the curls of a full-bottomed periwig, or Raphael had attempted to give expression to the tapestry figures in the House of Lords. Shakespeare has put an excellent description of this fashionable jargon into the mouth of the critical Holofernes 'as too picked, too spruce, too affected, too odd, as it were, too peregrinate, as I may call it'; and nothing can be more marked than the difference when he breaks loose from the trammels he had imposed on himself, 'as light as bird from brake', and speaks in his own person. We think, for instance, that in the following soliloquy the poet has fairly got the start of Queen Elizabeth and her maids of honour:—

Biron. O! and I forsooth in love,
I that have been love's whip;
A very beadle to an amorous sigh:
A critic; nay, a night-watch constable,
A domineering pedant o'er the boy,
Than whom no mortal more magnificent.
This whimpled, whining, purblind, wayward boy,
This signior Junio, giant dwarf, Dan Cupid,
Regent of love-rimes, lord of folded arms,
Th' anointed sovereign of sighs and groans:
Liege of all loiterers and malcontents,
Dread prince of plackets, king of codpieces,
Sole imperator, and great general
Of trotting parators (O my little heart!)
And I to be a corporal of his field,
And wear his colours like a tumbler's hoop?
What? I love! I sue! I seek a wife!
A woman, that is like a German clock,
Still a repairing; ever out of frame;
And never going aright, being a watch,
And being watch'd, that it may still go right?

Nay, to be perjur'd, which is worst of all:
And among three to love the worst of all,
A whitely wanton with a velvet brow,
With two pitch balls stuck in her face for eyes;
Ay, and by heav'n, one that will do the deed,
Though Argus were her eunuch and her guard;
And I to sigh for her! to watch for her!
To pray for her! Go to; it is a plague
That Cupid will impose for my neglect
Of his almighty dreadful little might.
Well, I will love, write, sigh, pray, sue, and groan:
Some men must love my lady, and some Joan.

The character of Biron drawn by Rosaline and that which Biron gives of Boyet are equally happy. The observations on the use and abuse of study, and on the power of beauty to quicken the understanding as well as the senses, are excellent. The scene which has the greatest dramatic effect is that in which Biron, the king, Longaville, and Dumain, successively detect each other and are detected in their breach of their vow and in their profession of attachment to their several mistresses, in which they suppose themselves to be overheard by no one. The reconciliation between these lovers and their sweethearts is also very good, and the penance which Rosaline imposes on Biron, before he can expect to gain her consent to marry him, full of propriety and beauty.

Rosaline. Oft have I heard of you, my lord Biron,
Before I saw you: and the world's large tongue
Proclaims you for a man replete with mocks;
Full of comparisons, and wounding flouts;
Which you on all estates will execute,
That lie within the mercy of your wit.
To weed this wormwood from your faithful brain;
And therewithal to win me, if you please,
(Without the which I am not to be won)
You shall this twelvemonth term from day to day
Visit the speechless sick, and still converse
With groaning wretches; and your task shall be,
With all the fierce endeavour of your wit,
T' enforce the pained impotent to smile.

Biron. To move wild laughter in the throat of death?
It cannot be: it is impossible:
Mirth cannot move a soul in agony.

Rosaline. Why, that's the way to choke a gibing spirit,
Whose influence is begot of that loose grace,
Which shallow laughing hearers give to fools;

A jest's prosperity lies in the ear
Of him that hears it; never in the tongue
Of him that makes it: then, if sickly ears,
Deaf'd with the clamours of their own dear groans,
Will hear your idle scorns, continue then,
And I will have you, and that fault withal;
But, if they will not, throw away that spirit,
And I shall find you empty of that fault,
Right joyful of your reformation.

Biron. A twelvemonth? Well, befall what will befall,
I'll jest a twelvemonth in an hospital.

The famous cuckoo-song closes the play; but we shall add no more criticisms: 'the words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo'.

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