

Love's Labour's Lost

INTRODUCTION

THE 1598 edition of *Love's Labour's Lost* is the first play text to carry Shakespeare's name on the title-page, which also refers to performance before the Queen 'this last Christmas'. The play is said to be 'Newly corrected and augmented', so perhaps an earlier edition has failed to survive. Even so, the text shows every sign of having been printed from Shakespeare's working papers, since it includes some passages in draft as well as in revised form. We print the drafts as Additional Passages. The play was probably written some years before publication, in 1593 or 1594.

The setting is Navarre—a kingdom straddling the border between Spain and France—where the young King and three of his friends vow to devote the following three years to austere self-improvement, forgoing the company of women. But they have forgotten the imminent arrival on a diplomatic mission of the Princess of France with, as it happens, three of her ladies; much comedy derives from, first, the men's embarrassed attempts to conceal from one another that they are falling in love, and second, the girls' practical joke in exchanging identities when the men, disguised as Russians, come to entertain and to woo them. Shakespeare seems to have picked up the King's friends' names—Biron, Dumaine, and Longueville—from leading figures in contemporary France, but to have invented the plot himself. He counterpoints the main action with events involving characters based in part on the type-figures of Italian commedia dell'arte who reflect facets of the lords' personalities. Costard, an unsophisticated, open-hearted yokel, and his girl-friend Jaquenetta are sexually uninhibited; Don Adriano de Armado, 'a refined traveller of Spain' who also, though covertly, loves Jaquenetta, is full of pompous affectation; and Holofernes, a schoolmaster (seen always with his admiring companion, the curate Sir Nathaniel), demonstrates the avid pedantry into which the young men's verbal brilliance could degenerate. Much of the play's language is highly sophisticated (this is, as the title-page claims, a 'conceited comedy'), in keeping with its subject matter. But the action

reaches its climax when a messenger brings news which is communicated entirely without verbal statement. This is a theatrical masterstroke which also signals Shakespeare's most daring experiment with comic form. 'The scene begins to cloud'; in the play's closing minutes the lords and ladies seek to readjust themselves to the new situation, and the play ends in subdued fashion with a third entertainment, the songs of the owl and the cuckoo.

Love's Labour's Lost was for long regarded as a play of excessive verbal sophistication, of interest mainly because of a series of supposed topical allusions; but a number of distinguished twentieth-century productions have revealed its theatrical mastery.