Love’s Labour’s Lost

Love’s Labour’s Lost can be dated between 1578, when all the sources were available and 1598, when it was mentioned three times.

Publication Date

The earliest surviving text of the play is the quarto edition of 1598.

[Q1, 1598]: A PLEASANT Conceited Comedie CALLED, Loues Labors lost. As it vvas presented before her Highnes this last Christmas. Newly corrected and augmented By W.Shakespere. Imprinted at London by W. W. for Cuthbert Burby. 1598.

This was the first play to be published carrying the name ‘Shakespere’. This first known edition shares three features with the ‘good’ quarto of Romeo and Juliet (1599): neither was entered in the Stationers’ Register, both were published by Burby, and both claim to be “newly corrected and augmented.” Since the ‘good’ quarto of Romeo and Juliet was evidently issued to supplant the ‘bad’ Quarto of 1597, David argues (intro, xvii) that it is “likely that [Burby’s LLL] was issued with the same purpose, to replace a ‘bad’ Quarto of which no copy has survived”. This idea has received attention from Felicia Hardison Londré (328), who has suggested that there was an earlier play, the model for LLL had been composed by another author.1 Francis Meres in his Palladis Tamia (1598) lists the play among the six comedies (balancing six histories) composed by Shakespeare:

for Comedy, witness his Gentlemen of Verona, his Errors, his Loue labours lost, his Loue labours wonne, his midsummer night dream, & his Merchant of Venice.

It is not known if Meres saw Love’s Labour’s Lost in performance or knew of it second hand. Two of the listed plays had not been published by this time, Two Gentlemen of Verona and Comedy of Errors, while one, Love’s Labour’s Won, has not been identified with any certainty.

The play was not entered in the Stationers’ Register until 22 January 1607, when it was transferred from Burby to Nicholas Ling. Later the same year, it was transferred to John Smethwick. The play was published in F1 in 1623 as the seventh comedy, after Much Ado about Nothing and before Midsummer Night’s Dream. A second quarto, based on F1, was printed in 1631:

[Q2, 1631]: Loues labours lost. A wittie and pleasant comedie, as it was acted by His Maiesties seruants at the Blacke-Friers and the Globe. Written by William Shakespeare. London: printed by W. S. [William Stansby] for John Smethwicke, and are to be sold at his shop in Saint Dunstones Churchyard vnder the Diall, 1631.

Performance Dates

The date of the first performance is unknown. The 1598 title-page indicates a performance at Court the previous Christmas (either 1597 or 1598). If the play was published between 25 March and 24 December 1598, “this last Christmas” began in December 1597 in modern chronology. But in the old style of dating, publication during the next three months, up to what we would call 24 March 1599, would also have counted as 1598 – in which
Woudhuysen demonstrates that the assertion of a recent court performance (as, indeed, that of an improved text) is not necessarily reliable: he observes that several plays, reprinted well into the seventeenth century, claimed recent performances before Queen Elizabeth – long after she was dead! The reprint simply copied the title-page of the previous edition.  

It is possible that the court performance occurred several Christmases before 1597. Woudhuysen (1998: 61) tentatively suggests that the play might have been written for performance at court by the recently formed Lord Chamberlain’s Men, who played on 26 and 27 December 1594.

Specific attention has been called to one of the earliest external references to the play, in the poem *Alba: The Month’s Mind of a Melancholy Lover* by the “emphatically minor” poet Richard Tofte (published 1598).  

Occurring in the third part of the poem, the relevant passage runs:

*Loves Labor Lost, I once did see a Play
Ycleped so, so called to my paine,*

David comments on the ambiguity of “once”, which suggests “some time long before the time of writing, but it is just possible that it means...
‘on one occasion only’” (1997: xxiii). Dover Wilson suggests that the play as we have it is a revision of an earlier version acted at the Earl of Southampton’s house in the plague year of 1593–4 (1962: 115). This is unlikely, as the Earl of Southampton was a ward at Cecil House under the care of Lord Burghley until he came of age on 6 October 1594.4

Halliday suggests that this same earl may be connected with the next recorded performance, in January 1605 (1955: 102). The Revels Account has this entry: “By his Maiesties plaieris. Betwen Newers Day and Twelde day A play of Loues Labours Lost.” This is probably the performance referred to in letters written in January 1605 by Sir Walter Cope and Dudley Carlton. The latter states that the Queen and “a great part of the Court” were feasted at “my Lord of Cranbornes [Robert Cecil’s] house,” as they had been two nights earlier at “my Lord of Southamptons”; it seems that the play was given a private performance at one of these houses during the week after twelfth night.

The title-page of the second quarto (1631) states that the play was acted publicly “at Blackfriars and the Globe.”

Sources

Bullough finds no single literary source from which the plot might have been derived. He finds that the play is in the tradition of the Italian commedia dell’arte, especially in the generic names which occur in the quarto: Braggart for Armado, Pedant for Holophernes, Curate for Nathaniel, Clown for Costard.

Bullough also observes general influence from the courtly plays of John Lyly,

whose influence is especially potent in the witty, teasing women, the interest in ideas, and the under-plot which parodies high life below stairs. From Lyly spring the scholastic humour of its pedants, the comic use of logic, rhetoric and grammar. . . . the relationship between Armado and Moth recalls that of Sir Tophas and Epiton in [John Lyly’s] Endimion.

Endimion was published in 1591, but had been written by late 1587.5

Bullough believes that Love’s Labour’s Lost drew on Pierre de la Primaudey’s L’Académie française, published in 1577 (Books 1–2 were translated into English in 1586 by Thomas Bowes). Primauadaye describes how four young nobles withdraw from worldly life to devote themselves to the study of Latin and Greek. Their studies, however, are interrupted by the outbreak of civil war. Primauadaye dedicated his work to Henri III, King of France. Bullough describes the remarkable similarities between the play and events at the court of Navarre at Nérac, in south-west France. Modern knowledge of these events derives mainly from Marguerite de Valois, who died in 1615. Since her Mémoires were not published until 1628 (and only translated into English in 1658), most scholars are unable to explain remarkable correspondence of the Mémoires with the play. Margaré had married Henri, King of Navarre (who succeeded his cousin to become Henri IV of France in 1589) in 1572, five days before the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre at Paris. Henri, King of Navarre, received two embassies from France, one in 1578 and the other in 1586, either of which might have served as a model for that in Love’s Labour’s Lost. In 1578–9, the ambassador was indeed a Princess of France (c.f. 1.1.133; 2.1.30), Marguerite (Margot) de Valois, estranged wife of Henri, who came to Nérac with her mother, Catherine de Medici. In the earlier visit, an important topic of discussion was Marguerite’s dowry, which included Aquitaine (mentioned at 1.1.135; 2.1.8; 2.1.35ff.). On both occasions the royal envoy, reinforcing diplomacy with coquetry, was supported by that bevy of ladies-in-waiting who for their grace and flightiness were known as ‘l’escadron volant’. In the years immediately before her visit, Marguerite had made journeys exactly corresponding to those referred to by the Princess and her ladies in the play: to Alençon (2.1.61) in 1578 and to Liège (Brabant; 2.1.113) in 1577. The other embassy occurred in 1586, when Queen Catherine herself met Henri at Saint Brice, near Cognac. Interestingly, in several places the quarto reads ‘Queen’ for ‘Princess’ – Margot, of course, was Queen of Navarre.

The King’s ‘Academe’ is also a reflection of history. In 1583 the English ambassador to the court of France reported to Walsingham that Navarre had “furnished his Court with principal gentlemen of the Religion, and reformed his house”. Navarre had in fact followed widespread fashion and become royal patron of an academy, as had his brother-in-law, Henri III of France,
who attended his own Palace Academy from 1576–9. The vogue for academies – essentially philosophical debating societies – had started in renaissance Italy. Though the Ducs de Biron and de Longueville were not members of Navarre’s academy, they were his political allies from 1589, and the names Boyet, Marcade and de la Mothe appear in contemporary registers of court officials. The King’s impetuous riding (4.1.1–2) and his covering the whole sheet, “margin and all,” in his letter-writing (5.2.7–8) were actual habits of Henri of Navarre.6

Some commentators suggest an echo between Love’s Labour’s Lost and Robert Southwell’s St Peter’s Complaint, published in 1595 (Dover Wilson, 1977: lix). Southwell was in prison from 1592 until his execution in 1595, so it is unlikely that the dramatist could have seen this poem before its publication. The play’s possible word-play on ‘eyes’ and ‘stars’ is slight and the direction of influence unclear.

**Orthodox Date**

Chambers dated the play to 1594 and most commentators follow this dating (Yates, David, Wells & Taylor, Hibbard and Woudhuysen). Richard David argues for a revision before Christmas 1597.

Alexander suggests earlier dates of 1592-94; Honigmann places it in 1592. The OED cites under the head word ‘honorificabilitudinitatibus’: “1588 SHAKES. L.L.L. V. i. 44 Thou art not so long by the head as honorificabilitudinitatibus.” It is not known how the editors of the OED arrive at so early a date for the play. Athos follows this dating in the Signet Paperback edition. Wiggins dates this play to 1596, but this is dependent on the certainty of other dates: “The year 1595 is a crowded one for the Shakespeare canon so the Annals date is unlikely: 1597 is already full, and a date in early 1598 would leave no time for the writing of the sequel, Love’s Labours Won [1598]. The play is therefore most likely to have been written in 1594 or 1596” expressing a preference for the later date (III:320).

**Internal Orthodox Evidence**

David justifies his dating by historical allusions in the text, such as the matching of several characters in the play, in name at least, with historical French contemporaries of the playwright. Henri IV’s period of greatest popularity in England was between 1591 and 1593, before he converted to Catholicism. David observes echoes at 4.2.80–84 of the pamphlet war between Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe (Pierce Penilesse, etc.) in 1592–3; of Ralegh’s circle of ‘atheists,’ the ‘Schoole of Night’ (referred to at 4.3.253 as ‘the style of night’) and his fall from favour in 1592 on account of his liaison with Elizabeth Throckmorton; and of the appearance of Negro-Tartars (5.2.120–1 ff.) in the Gray’s Inn revels at Christmas 1594. He also notes the recurrence of many ideas and images from the Shakespeare poems published in 1593/4, especially Lucrece.

Woudhuysen, in his fuller discussion of the dating, notes that 1594–5 is the date generally accepted by scholars, but he acknowledges that “the evidence for it is fairly thin”; he considers attempts to date the play through its French associations or the Gray’s Inn revels “unsatisfactory”, and finds attempts to use other topical allusions “not convincing” (1998: 59–60).

Woudhuysen’s own particular view of the play is that “it draws on a range of [Sir Philip] Sidney’s writings and develops some of the literary and artistic problems which exercised him”; its ‘riches… are bound up with Shakespeare’s appreciation of Sidney’s achievement as an imaginative writer’; “Shakespeare is showing that he has mastered Sidney’s writings, and that he can overgo them” (1998: 6). The play seems to challenge theories which Sidney expounded in The Defence of Poetry. Holofernes has a counterpart in the schoolmaster, Rombus, in Sidney’s short play, The Lady of May. These works did not appear in print until 1595 and 1598 respectively. Woudhuysen suggests that Shakespeare could have read these in manuscript (1998: 3).

Some commentators have cited both the play’s structure, and its use of rhyme and its metrical forms as evidence of early composition, though others (including David) recognise that these features could have been deliberately chosen for the highly artificial theme and special purpose of the play (1977: xxiv).
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External Orthodox Evidence

Three references establish that the play was completed by 1598: the title page of Q1, the allusion in Tofte's Alba and the list in Meres's Palladis Tamia.

Oxfordian Date

Eva Turner Clark and Charlton Ogburn place the writing of the play before 11 January 1579; Holland seems to allow a few more weeks. Felicia Hardison Londré points to “numerous internal references” indicating 1578 as the original date. More recently Hess, whilst recognising 1578 as the earliest possible date, considers 1583 as the most likely date of writing, on stylistic grounds. Anderson sees strong links between Oxford’s situation in 1593 and the events of the play.

Internal Oxfordian Evidence

The focus of earlier writers has been, of course, the 1578 visit of Marguerite de Valois to her husband, Henri de Navarre. But other allusions reinforce the proposal of 1578. Boyet describes Armado as “a Monarcho” (4.1.98); this was the title assumed by a mad Italian who frequented the English court and died c. 1580.7

In August 1578 Queen Elizabeth and her court – the Earl of Oxford included – visited Norwich: Oxfordians have suggested that there are two allusions to this visit: firstly, in 4.2.1–2, Nathaniel, a curate, comments: “Very reverend sport, truly, and done in the testimony of a good conscience”; a Norwich minister, Nathaniel Woodes wrote a play called The Conflict of Conscience, printed in 1581. Secondly, Holofernes instructs Nathaniel: “Sir, you shall present before her the Nine Worthies” (5.1.111–2); Dovey describes how a pageant of Worthies was presented before the Queen at Norwich, a pageant organised by the poet Thomas Churchyard, of Oxford’s household.

Rima Greenhill has demonstrated that various scenes, events and uses of language point to relations between England and Russia in the late 1570s and early 1580s. The pageant of nine worthies seems to recall events from 1584 onwards. She believes that the play is an in-house satire for the court audience of Queen Elizabeth, originally written 1578–9 but updated in the 1580s.

The play contains many features of the euphuistic style made fashionable by the publication of John Lyly’s Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit, early in 1578. Up until the middle of the twentieth century, it was a commonplace of orthodox criticism that Love’s Labour’s Lost either imitated or satirised Lyly’s affected language (his euphuism). But David, writing in 1951, denies any direct connection:

There is no real similarity between Shakespeare’s play and those of Lyly, which belong to an older and more courtly genre even than Love’s Labour’s Lost; the ridiculous language of Armado and Holofernes is much nearer to Sidney’s Arcadia than to Lyly’s Euphues. (1977: xxxi)

Woudhuysen, writing in the last decade, does not even mention euphuism, though he states:

The play is in parts reminiscent of the court comedies and the prose romances of John Lyly, especially in the comic use of scholastic knowledge, the advancement of the plot through witty debate rather than through deeds, and the careful ordering and patterning of characters and action. (1998: 62)8

This change in approach is understandable. It is difficult for orthodox scholars to explain why a young dramatist, newly arrived in London c. 1592, should choose to write a play imitating (or satirising) a literary style which had become unfashionable in the middle of the previous decade. Both Arden editors confirm their difficulty and follow Bullough’s observations about the influence of the commedia dell’arte. Where did the Warwickshire lad come across that? According to Chambers, Italian players were in England – but not in Stratford-upon-Avon – at various times between 1573–8, when Shakespeare was a youth.

The Harvey–Nashe quarrel has strong implications both for an early date and for Oxfordian authorship. It originated in 1580 after the tennis-court quarrel between Oxford and Sir Philip Sidney: Gabriel Harvey, a member of the Sidney–Leicester team, wrote a lampoon which could be interpreted as an attack on Oxford, and Lyly – by then Oxford’s secretary – drew his master’s attention to it. At the start of the Marprelate controversy in 1589, Lyly challenged Harvey, whose response was an attack on Nashe.

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Nashe responded by attacking Harvey in *Pierce Penilesse*. Scholars, orthodox or otherwise, are convinced that, in the play, Moth, called “juvenal” at 1.2.8 and 3.1.64, is taken to satirise Nashe. Fewer are confident about identifying Harvey, but the pedantic Holofernes is a strong traditional candidate and would easily have been identified with Harvey by a courtly audience fully aware of the background. Anderson (260-4) therefore dates the play to 1593-4, identifying Oxford with Berowne and the young William Shakespeare with old Costard. He concludes: “Perhaps the greatest irony in the entire Shake-speare fable in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is that de Vere’s reputation was already lost.” Anderson’s dating of the play (or its revision) coincides with the arrival in England of Antonio Pérez (1539-1611), who had been exiled from Spain and was trying to ingratiate himself with nobles at Elizabeth’s court. Various commentators have accepted an identification between Pérez and Don Armado.

Although orthodox commentaries have tended to focus on the Gray’s Inn revels of 1594 as the source of the Muscovite–Russian disguise of the King’s party in 5.2, there were earlier stage-representations of Russians: Thomas Lodge, writing in 1579–80, refers to “your Muscovian straugers” having appeared on stage among other exotic creatures. David observes that Muscovy was “much in the news” throughout the 1580s and ’90s (1977: 133n).

**External Oxfordian Evidence**

Clark and the Ogburns propose that *A Double Maske*, “shewen before her maistie the ffrench Imbassador being present the sonday night after Twelfdaie” – i.e. after 6th January 1579 – was the first version of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. On that night, Simier, the envoy of the Duc d’Alençon in the investigation of his possible marriage to Queen Elizabeth, was entertained at court by *A Maske of Amasones* and *A Maske of Knightes*, described as “an entertainment in imitation of a tournament between six ladies and a like number of gentlemen who surrendered to them”.

The evidence within the play indicates, firstly, that it must have been written at the latest in the 1580s (it may have been revised later) and, secondly, that it must have been written by an author experienced in courtly and literary matters.

Two orthodox scholars make two points for the Oxfordian case most persuasively. First, Alfred Harbage of Harvard University (1962: 27) asked a series of questions:

Why should a play written for adult professionals in the mid-nineties so much resemble plays written for child professionals in the mid-eighties? The resemblance is not superficial. It is observable in content, form and spirit. It seems highly suggestive that all the basic ingredients of the play became available in a cluster in the *decade* [emphasis added] before 1588, and that nothing that became available thereafter was used except incidental phrases.

Secondly, Dover Wilson stated in 1932 (and restated in 1960: 41)

> To credit this amazing piece of virtuosity... to one whose education was nothing more than what a grammar school and residence in a little provincial borough could provide is to invite one either to believe in miracles or to disbelieve in the man from Stratford.

There is considerable evidence linking Oxford to euphuism, and allowing him contact with the *commedia dell’arte*, experience of courtly life and literary debate, and knowledge of affairs in France and with Russia. In 1578 Oxford was twenty-eight years old, a poet and patron of writers, in a position to respond to and adapt the latest literary fashion introduced by Lyly, the man who became his secretary in 1579. Moreover, Oxford was well acquainted with Sir Philip Sidney and was probably familiar with Sidney’s literary views in the early 1580s when he was writing *The Defence of Poetry* (he was killed in 1586). Regarding Sidney’s works in manuscript, Oxford would have had considerably easier access than would Shakespeare.

Oxford also had considerable opportunity to see Italian Comedy. In 1575-6, he visited France and Italy, spending much of his time in Venice, so it is more than probable that he had experienced the *commedia dell’arte*. Oxford had also been presented at the court of the French King, Henri III in 1575 and may have visited Henri de Navarre when returning from Italy; he was certainly on good terms with Navarre after he became King Henri IV (Nelson, 121).
Conclusion

*Love’s Labour’s Lost* can be dated between 1578 by which time all the sources were available, and 1598 when it was first mentioned. It is likely to have been composed soon after 1578 and revised in 1593.

Notes

1. “Newly corrected and augmented” refers to a phrase which appears on the title-pages of the respective quartos, which David (1977) discusses several times. Hardison Londré (p. 195–6) supports the argument for a ‘bad’ quarto, but takes care to point out that the *Romeo and Juliet* quarto of 1599 reads, more specifically, “newly corrected, augmented, and amended”. Of course, the point of similarity still stands.

2. Woudhuysen’s argument is emphatic: he cites the claim that the anonymous play *Mucedorus* was “Amplified with new additions”, a claim which was repeated on the title-pages of editions in 1611, 1613, 1615, 1618, 1619, 1621 and so on. Likewise, *The Shoemakers’ Holiday* (1600) continued to claim it had been acted before the Queen on New Year’s Day in 1610, 1618, 1624, 1631 and 1657 (1998: 304). Woudhuysen concludes that, considering also the discrepancy between the phrasology of the title-pages, “in these circumstances it would be unwise to try to reconstruct the textual history of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* on the precedent of *Romeo and Juliet* without further corroborative evidence” (1998: 304). Woudhuysen’s edition includes a very detailed discussion of the textual history of the play (Appendix 1, 298–339).


5. The title page in 1591 states that *Endimion* had been performed before the Queen at Greenwich on Candlemass by the Children of Paul’s. G. K. Hunter, *John Lyly: the Humanist as Courtier* (187) reports that the only such occasion was in 1588. Chambers cautiously agrees that *Endimion* was performed on this occasion (*ES* iv, 103). Of course, it does not follow that the play had only just been composed, merely that this was its most famous performance.


7. For Monarcho, the mad Italian, David (67) gives a very detailed note, based on the description of Thomas Churchyard’s *The Phantasticall Monarke*, published in 1580. Monarcho is also mentioned in Nashe’s *Saffron Walden* (1596) and in Meres’s *Wits Commonwealth* (1598). From 1576–80, Oxford was a leading light at the court of Elizabeth (Nelson, 186–209), and he employed Churchyard at this time as a secretary (Nelson, 223).

8. For further discussion on possible links between these plays, see David Bevington, “Jack hath not Jill”: failed courtship in Lyly and Shakespeare,” *SS*, 42 (1990), 1–13.

9. Gustav Ungerer has identified Don Armado with Pérez (A *Spaniard in Elizabethan England: the Correspondence of Antonio Pérez’s exile*), and is followed by many commentators. For a more general account of Antonio Pérez, see the biography by Gregorio Marañón (1947, translated into English by Charles Ley, 1954).


11. The English Ambassador wrote that he had presented Oxford to the King and Queen of France on 7 March 1575. In 1576, there was a suggestion that Oxford was in touch with Henri III over the Catholic Question (Nelson, 169). In 1595, Henri IV wrote to Oxford in warm terms:

[I write] to inform you of the satisfaction I feel for the good offices you have performed on my behalf in her [i.e. the Queen’s] presence, which I beg you to continue and believe that I will always consider it a great pleasure to reciprocate in whatever might bring about your personal satisfaction (Nelson, 349).

As Oxford did not attend court much in the 1590s, it is not known what he did on behalf of Henri IV. Oxford may have met Henri de Navarre when travelling back to Paris from Italy in April 1576; Oxford passed through Lyon and various military encampments but his exact itinerary is not known (Nelson, 134).
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