

That's a Joke, Son

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Randolph L. Wadsworth Jr.

In England, the home of rowing as a sport, when coxswains want their crews to stop, they say, "Let 'er run." In North America, the usual command is "Way enough." That's w-a-y, as in the general notion that something moving is said to be "under way" or in the specifically nautical sense of "way" as the motion of a vessel through the water. People sometimes end up confused over this point, as in a recent compendium of rowing lore compiled by a coach of the Canadian National Team, where the chapter on coxing explains that the command to stop is w-e-i-g-h enough, as if one were expected to assess the mass of some unspecified substance, and only a vague sufficiency of it at that. Confusion city, when all we want is for the boat to stop. And this from a woman who has coxed gold-medal crews in both the Olympics and World Championships. True, the *OED* does list w-e-i-g-h as a substantive, but only in the phrase "under weigh," and then only as (and I quote) "a variant of *under* [*w-a-y*] from **erroneous** association with the phrase 'to weigh anchor'." Still, if the coxswain and the compiler didn't know better, their editors and copy readers should have. I'm sure Frank Davis would agree with me that no such error would have crept into the *Times Star* when Literary Club stalwarts Joe Sagmaster and George Stimson were there. You just have to wonder what has happened to standards these days.

After this opening shot, I'm sure a few of you, knowing my vocation in retirement, will be expecting the dreaded hobby paper. Well, there will be hobby horses, no doubt, but rowing is only the way in, not the paper itself; so you may rest easy on that point. As for the cavil over "way enough," you might be tempted to chalk that up to professional deformation, given my thirty-nine years as a teacher of English, but that assessment would be too generous by half. I was predisposed to nit-picking long before I took up the corruption of youth.

Now, I don't know what all your boyhood gangs were like, but I'd be surprised if there wasn't in every one of them at least one kid who insisted that everything had to be just right, whether it was the rules of a game, or what was done by real cowboys, or perhaps the geography of Robin Hood's Nottinghamshire, or even the correct

pronunciation of that county. Well, things were a little different in our end of Fort Thomas, and I say “end” advisedly. My gang numbered four, three from a widely extended family and one civilian, thrown together by the proximity of our four riverside hilltops to each other and by their joint remoteness from the rest of the town. I’m afraid all four of us were sticklers for rules and verisimilitude, although more often than not in a spirit of cooperation rather than competition. If one of us could persuade the others, say, that *Howard Pyle’s Book of Pirates*, with its lurid illustrations by N. C. Wyeth, was a better authority on some point of cutthroat conduct than *Treasure Island*, the others would usually go along. The mother on whose central summit we most often landed remarked that we seemed to spend more time planning and rehearsing our scenarios than playing them out, and she would doubtless have had an even better laugh if she had observed the innumerable times we stopped in mid-career to replay a scene more in accordance with someone’s idea of a better way. One adult, the indulgent grandmother of one of us, did in fact witness a dramatic instance of our joint mania for authenticity. When we arrived back at the barn, our mounts foaming with sweat and not a little blown, she was there to see her horses cooled down, washed, dried, and curried with especial care, for she had seen the whole show: some eight or nine times we had charged out of a neighboring wood and galloped across maybe two hundred yards of pasture, until we were sure we had Morgan’s Raiders down pat, rebel yells and all. Given our obsessive attention to detail, we might have been training as movie directors. In the end, though, to the surprise of not a single parent, we all ended up as teachers.

That bit of full disclosure out of the way, let me return, to the confusion of “way enough” with “weigh anchor.” I guess I should be a little more charitable toward that Canadian coxswain. After all, others have been confused by references far removed from their own experience. Just consider the sportswriter I noticed recently who said a coach needed to “reign” in his players—that’s “reign” with a “g.” Who could blame him? It has been a long time since most Americans took horses for granted or lived under a monarch. I could even instance myself. When my mother meant, “What’s the hurry?” she’d say, “Keep your pants on,” which always struck me as odd. I took my pants off to bathe, to change from my jeans into dress-up clothes, or to retire for the night—things I

was never in a hurry to do. I was well into the age of bouncing hormones before I could envision an alternative reason.

In any case, the confused coxswain is in good company. Even Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* falls into the error of "under w-e-i-g-h." This is understandable, for, as in the case of many common sayings, the time when "weigh anchor" was new enough to make some sort of literal sense was as long ago as the fifteenth century. The expression would appear to have arisen from one of those feeble maritime jokes of the sort that Patrick O'Brian attributes to his long-running protagonist, Captain John Aubrey. (The worst of these, the groaner involving the lesser of two weevils, even made it into the movie *Captain and Commander*.) As the OED points out, before "weigh anchor" became a term of art, the term was "weigh **the** anchor," that is, hoist it from the bottom and you'll find out how heavy it is. When I saw the latter phrase—with the definite article—in one of the Aubrey novels, I wondered how O'Brian could have resisted the temptation.

Imagine it. A green midshipman, reared far from the sea, aboard his first ship for only a day or so and innocent of any nautical lore, is told, "Run along for'ard now and tell the boatswain to weigh the anchor." This makes no sense whatever to him; but, awed by the majesty of his captain, whose word he knows is not to be questioned, the stripling does as he's told. When he finally seeks explanation, perhaps from a friendly boatswain or a condescending senior midshipman, I'd have it accompanied by that signature tag line of Senator Beauregard Claghorn, the stereotypical bombastic southern politician on the Fred Allen show. On every show, that irrepressible bloviator would get off a painfully bad attempt at wit. When Allen failed to laugh, as he always did, the Senator would say, "That's a joke. I say, that's a joke, son." (The routine was so well known that the Warner Brothers cartoon people even dreamed up a chicken patterned on the Senator and named it Foghorn Leghorn.)

Of course, there's nothing new at all in terms of art that have their origin in someone's attempt at wit. For example, I wonder if the lawyers—And, my goodness, don't we have a lot of them?—know that in the courts of ancient Greece the words for what we call the plaintiff and the defendant were rather more vivid: their literal meanings were "a pursuer" and "one who flees." One imagines these terms being introduced with

“That’s a joke, son” and progressing to acceptance because of their gallows appropriateness. All professions have their own brands of inside joke, and everyday speech is filled with one-time witticisms that, far removed from their origins in real-life experience, have sunk to the status of cliché; “a burr under the saddle,” “the cold shoulder,” “off the cuff,” “basket case” . . . the list is endless. Trivial in their way, but evidence of the mind at work. How much poorer our world would be without a little such spice in ordinary discourse, not to mention how dull literature would be if there were not room for play, even (or perhaps especially) in works of the deepest seriousness.

I once snookered a journal into publishing an explication of a particularly ignoble joke embodied in a little poem by Ben Jonson, an epistle that asks a friend who works at the mint to help him cheat on a bet by supplying him with overweight coins. I say “snookered” because I’m sure no journal would have considered the poem worth explicating or the article worth printing if I hadn’t thrown in Jonson’s preface to his *Epigrammes*:

Pray thee, take care, that tak’st my book in hand,
To reade it well: that is, to understand.

That cut enough ice with the editors to get the piece printed, although it did not suffice for the Dean, who sent me a note suggesting that I waste no further time on such trivia.

Jonson wasn’t writing for the Dean. He was writing for an early seventeenth-century audience steeped in humanistic learning, an audience who agreed that using one’s nut to understand something, anything, was a good in and of itself. Moreover, Jonson was an inveterate poker of fun at all manner of targets, not only in his satiric plays, but in several poems directed at himself. Many of these have to do with his notable corpulence. One, addressed to a painter friend, asserts “With one great blot, you’d form’d me as I am,” while another maintains that his weight is enough to “break chairs, or crack a coach.”

The most serious of Jonson’s jokes against himself is a sequence entitled “A Celebration of Charis in Ten Lyrique Pieces.” In these poems, a middle-aged speaker identified as “Ben” starts out by protesting that his love for a young woman, called

“Charis,” is wholly platonic. But, time after time, the speaker’s actions belie his words, revealing both to the young woman and to others that his motives are erotic. The girl rebuffs his suit with humor, patience, and the utmost courtesy, until eventually “Ben” concedes in public that he has played the fool and that she is entitled to be free of his importunities. We come away from the sequence with respect for two persons who have behaved honorably, having achieved through laughter at themselves a perspective that enables them to treat each other with tolerance and respect. Please keep this in mind. It might turn up on the quiz.

Now, for our last author of the evening, I’d like to turn to the ultimate literary jokester, the shape-shifter of them all, Shakespeare. The range here is virtually without limit, from the obvious one-liner to an entire play as joke. No doubt fully mindful that “dial” is contemporary slang for “prostitute,” Shakespeare won’t allow Mercutio simply to say it’s mid day. He must say, “. . . the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon.” Hamlet’s first line, while it contains the whole of his predicament in nine words, is a mere quibble: “A little more than kin, and less than kind.” And there are of course countless instances of bits taken out of context and turned into jokes by others, as with “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.” (If I seem to be taking it out on my learned brethren, I’m constrained here to make amends. No one in my line of work ought to laugh too long at this much-quoted speech from the treatment of Cade’s Rebellion in *Henry VI*. Illiterate themselves, the rabble are out to nail all those who lord it over them because they can read and write. The first person the mob take off to hang is a hapless clerk, an assistant schoolmaster who has merely been setting papers for boys.)

And of course others have plundered the Bard to make jokes in their own productions. A favorite of mine in this line, with apologies to Gibby, who doesn’t like puns, occurs in the Alec Guinness classic *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. In this film, set in Victoria’s England, the villain, a young man way down the line of succession to a title, colorfully bumps off a shoal of competitors, all played by Guinness. He begins with the current incumbent, a dabbler in photography. Explosives mixed in the hypo see to it that this unfortunate has a very negative experience in his darkroom. Having shot down a suffragette dropping leaflets from the basket of a balloon, the protagonist writes in his diary, “I shot an arrow in the air. She fell to earth in Berkeley Square.” After doing in

several more rivals, including an admiral who goes down with his ship, our anti-hero comes to his favorite escapade. A pompous general, boring a dinner party with what is clearly the umpteenth reprise for most of the guests, is recounting the brilliant disposition of his forces at a major battle. A pot of caviar, pressed into service to illustrate a point, blows up the moment it is moved. The murderer deadpans, “Death comes in many guises. It was caviar to the general.”

Finally, we arrive at the entire play as a joke, the last on tonight’s menu. It’s a rich joke, many of whose dimensions may well have been caviar to the general, for the whole effort is pitched at a highly literate audience, perhaps even a courtly one. The play in question is represented by the quotation on the wall behind me, a wall I’ve stood in front of, off and on, for a long time.

Tom Lehrer says on one of his records, “It’s a sobering thought that when Mozart was my age he’d been dead for three years.” It’s a sobering thought to me that when Mozart was my age, he’d been dead for thirty-five years. That’s half my life, and the span of time I’ve been a member of the Literary Club. Yet oddly, now that I’m one of the Old Farts, no longer thirty years or so younger than nearly all the others, I still feel as vulnerable as a first-time reader every time I stand in front of “Here comes one with a paper.”

It would be intriguing to know when our motto was chosen, by whom, and, most of all, why? Did some member just stumble across the line while reading or watching *Love’s Labours Lost* and seize upon it as the perfect background for a reader? Or did someone, either on his own or at the behest of the membership, go hunting for a suitable citation? I like to imagine a savvy member choosing “Here comes one with a paper” not only because it is literally apt, but because, in context, it can be seen as a powerful admonition to readers of papers from this lectern. That little sentence figures prominently in the anxiety dreams that dog my sleep for weeks as my date approaches. Seeking company in my wretchedness, I invite the rest of you share my apprehension and to see this seemingly harmless quotation in a more ominous light.

(Let me interrupt here to introduce an anecdote and to beg your indulgence. In a Shakespeare class several years ago, after I had read a speech two or three times, hoping to embody a range of interpretive possibilities, a student asked, “Prof., are you a

frustrated actor?” Before I could even think of a riposte, another student said, “Nah. He’s not frustrated at all.” Be that as it may, an actor I’m not. Any citations that follow are to support my argument, not to parade a thespian aspiration.)

A-typically of Shakespeare, the entire action of *Love’s Labours Lost* occurs in one place, the garden of Ferdinand, King of Navarre. Also a-typically, the story appears to be wholly Shakespeare’s own. A brief summary of the plot will suffice as a scaffold on which to hang some details to support my claim about our motto.

As our play opens, Ferdinand and three friends—Longaville, Dumaine, and Berowne—have sworn to retire for three years to the King’s palace, there, to withdraw from all distractions (and particularly from the company of women) to fast and study. A problem arises at once, however, when they realize that the King is already committed to welcome the Princess of France, who has come to settle some business of her old and ailing father.

We are next introduced to the characters of the sub-plot. These include Costard, a country clown; Don Adriano de Armado, a fantastical Spaniard who is visiting the court; Jaquanetta, a young girl pursued by both Costard and Armado; and Holofernes, a schoolmaster. Armado affords Shakespeare a true theatrical two-fer. As a Spaniard with a name that reminds the audience of Drake’s victory at sea, he can be mercilessly mocked for his accent; and he is, besides, the very type of the boasting soldier. (If you saw the Playhouse version of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, you saw his literary ancestor, Miles Gloriosus.) Holofernes, too, has ancestors in both Roman comedy and Italian *commedia del’ arte*. He is the arch pedant, no less fantastical than Armado, who tosses around his Latin and Greek at the slightest pretext. (He’s no doubt also the sort of fellow who would cavil over the misuse of “way enough,” but let that pass.)

Almost from the moment the Princess of France enters with three ladies in waiting, we can see what is going to happen. In an epidemic of love at first sight, the young men are smitten by the Princess and her three companions. Obviously casting aside their vows, the young men write desperately lovelorn verses to the new objects of their affection, all of which missives eventually find their recipients.

While the ladies are pondering how to handle this sudden onslaught, Boyet, major domo to the Princess, enters to tell them he has heard the young men planning to visit them disguised as Muscovites. The ladies resolve to meet the masquers in masks themselves, and to swap the favors they've been sent so that each putative lover will woo the wrong mistress. When the masks come off, it is possible for the ladies to vex the gentlemen for being forsworn twice over. They have betrayed both the terms of the academy and their protestations of undying love.

Things are getting very hot for the boys when a messenger arrives from France with the news that the old king is dead and that the Princess must leave at once for home, there to enter mourning for a year. The lovers get a reprieve: each is set a penance, on the understanding that if he satisfies its requirements, he may pursue his suit anew when the mourning is up. For the nonce, Love's labors are lost. If indeed the plaintiffs' suits are renewed a year hence, we have no way of knowing how they will be met. To borrow a line from a song in *Twelfth Night*, "What's to come is still unsure."

"Our" line is spoken by Berowne, whom we first meet wrangling with King Ferdinand over the requirements of the "academy." Wondering why he should study the subject of women without studying them in the flesh, he argues that there is more to be learned by looking into "a fairer eye" than by going blind poring over books. Ferdinand, determined to see through his grandiose scheme, which he hopes will guarantee fame and immortality to the four striplings, insists that Berowne join the others and subscribe to the monastic terms they have agreed to. But no sooner is that done than Berowne discovers the hitch I've mentioned. They have all forsworn conversation with women for three years, but, as he says to the King,

This article, my liege, yourself must break;
 For well you know here comes in embassy
 The French king's daughter with yourself to speak—
 A maid of grace and complete majesty—
 About surrender up of Aquitaine
 To her decrepit, sick and bedrid father:
 Therefore this article is made in vain,

Or vainly comes the admired princess hither.

When Ferdinand pleads necessity, Berowne responds:

Necessity will make us all forsworn
 Three thousand times within this three years' space;
 ...
 If I break faith, this word shall speak for me;
 I am forsworn on 'mere necessity.'

Our next significant encounter with Berowne is secondhand. When the Princess and her retinue enter the garden, her three ladies in waiting claim to have heard such flattering observations about Ferdinand's three friends that the Princess is prompted to say,

God bless my ladies! are they all in love,
 That every one her own hath garnished
 With such bedecking ornaments of praise?

By far the most extensive praise is that lavished on Berowne by Rosaline. "His eye," she has heard, "begets occasion for his wit," a wit she says is never unseemly and never fails to fascinate and entertain. This seems odd, however, for shortly after, when Rosaline actually speaks with Berowne, their discourse, after a few exchanges that foreshadow Beatrice and Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing*, ends with a rude put-down that prompts Berowne to retire:

BEROWNE

Now, God save thy life!

ROSALINE

And yours from long living!

BEROWNE

I cannot stay thanksgiving.

But he's back again only a few lines later. Dumaine and Longaville having asked the names of Katharine and Maria, the other two of the three ladies in waiting, Berowne reappears to ask, "What's her name in the cap?" and is told, "Rosaline, by good hap." It wants only her major domo to tell the Princess that the King shows all the signs of having fallen in love with her at first sight for us to realize that the plot is well and truly launched, four men intrigued by four women whose own curiosity seems to have been piqued.

The most intrigued of the men would appear to be Berowne, whom we next find giving a sealed missive to the rustic Costard for delivery to Rosaline. There follows a long soliloquy in which Berowne berates himself for falling in love. He is ashamed that one who has been, as he says, "love's whip" should now become "a corporal of his field, / And wear his colours like a tumbler's hoop." He cannot imagine that he should "love..., sue..., seek a wife," let alone that this particular woman should be the cause. The speech ends,

Nay, to be perjured, 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 heaven, 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.

No doubt provoked by rejection, and clearly persuaded—on what evidence he does not

say—that Rosaline is so ready for sex that she might cuckold a husband, he will adopt the role of the pining Petrarchan lover that Shakespeare’s audience had seen in innumerable sonnet sequences. (In a seminar I’d probably expatiate here on the way Shakespeare deals with Berowne’s contradictory motives in such a sonnet as the one that begins “The expense of spirit in a waste of shame,” but I’ll spare you that.)

Yet there’s even worse news in the offing for Berowne. His lines to Rosaline have gone astray. Costard has also been asked by Armado to carry a message to the country wench, Jaquanetta. Confused, he hands that packet to the Princess, saying it is to the lady Rosaline from the lord Berowne. The mistake is discovered at once, tipping the latter’s hand, while in the meantime Berowne’s message has ended up with Jaquanetta. Unable to make sense of Berowne’s high-flown rhetoric, Jaquanetta asks the help of Holofernes, who, realizing that it violates the rules of the “academy,” resolves to convey it to the King. Both camps will know in time that Berowne is attracted to Rosaline.

In a scene crucial to the plot (and to the Literary Club), Berowne enters the garden with a paper. Unaware that his message has miscarried, he again castigates himself for falling in love, for having been taught “to rhyme and to be melancholy.” The speech ends,

Well, she hath one o' my sonnets already: the clown bore it, the fool sent it, and the lady hath it: sweet clown, sweeter fool, sweetest lady! By the world, I would not care a pin, if the other three were in. Here comes one with a paper: God give him grace to groan!

At this point, Berowne climbs a tree, and Ferdinand enters, reading lines he has composed to the Princess. He has no sooner finished, to the accompaniment of scathing asides from Berowne, than Longaville enters, also holding a paper. Dropping his paper in hopes the Princess will find it, the King withdraws, allowing Longaville to incriminate himself before a hidden audience of two. Wondering how to convey his verses to Maria, Longaville withdraws when he remarks the approach of Dumaine, who completes the farce by reading his verses to Katharine to an audience of three. Longaville steps forth to rebuke Dumaine, the King steps forth to vex them both, and no sooner has Berowne

descended from his perch to whip all three for hypocrisy than Costard and Jaquanetta enter to deliver to the King the verses that will incriminate him as well.

The four of course agree to make common cause, led by Berowne, who urges them on in an audacious speech. They should give over the study of books and take up the study of women. He says,

For where is any author in the world
Teaches such beauty as a woman's eye?
Learning is but an adjunct to ourself
And where we are our learning likewise is:
Then when ourselves we see in ladies' eyes,
Do we not likewise see our learning there?

This is followed by a long catalogue of the ways in which love makes men irresistible, guaranteeing them mastery in endeavors of the heart. He then concludes,

Then fools you were these women to forswear,
Or keeping what is sworn, you will prove fools.
For wisdom's sake, a word that all men love,
Or for love's sake, a word that loves all men,
Or for men's sake, the authors of these women,
Or women's sake, by whom we men are men,
Let us once lose our oaths to find ourselves,
Or else we lose ourselves to keep our oaths.
It is religion to be thus forsworn,
For charity itself fulfills the law,
And who can sever love from charity?

Charity would in fact seem to occupy precious little space in this program, which appears to be above all a program for falling in love with the idea of oneself as a lover. The argument here is also a textbook example of a rhetorical stunt known to virtually every

schoolboy in Shakespeare's day. Every educated man (and a handful of women lucky enough to have had schooling) knew how to make the expedient appear preferable to the honorable. Examples, abound in the commonest Elizabethan manuals, invariably accompanied by the disclaimer that no honest person would employ such an argument, but that it was useful to know what it looked like so as to be on guard against it. (This reminds me of the labels on cans of yeast that said it was a violation of the Volstead Act to combine the contents with so much water and sugar until one's hygrometer registered a particular specific gravity.)

I forbear to vex these four youths for being less critical of their own motives than Jonson's "Ben," or than the speaker of Sir Philip Sydney's sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella*. Sonnet 71 of this sequence begins,

Who will in fairest book of Nature know
How virtue may best lodg'd in beauty be,
Let him but learn of Love to read in thee,
Stella, those fair lines which true goodness show.

It continues in this vein and ends,

So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,
As fast thy virtue bends that love to good.
'But ah,' Desire still cries: 'Give me some food.'

All right, I lied. I didn't forbear. But from here on out I'll let the ladies in the play judge these fellows.

The verbal strategy that will characterize the spirited young women is evident from the first speeches of the Princess. Charged by her major domo to be "as prodigal of all dear grace/ As Nature was in making graces dear,/ When she did starve the general world beside/ And prodigally gave them all to you," she cuts him off at the pass:

Good Lord Boyet, my beauty, though but mean,

Needs not the painted flourish of your praise:
 Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye,
 Not utter'd by base sale of chapmen's tongues:
 I am less proud to hear you tell my worth
 Than you much willing to be counted wise
 In spending your wit in the praise of mine.

If this seems a little snippy, consider that flattery as often as not is manipulative and that this girl is a walking takeover bid who might find it prudent to have a good stock of poison pills. Warned by Boyet that the King, thanks to his plans for the “academy” plans to lodge her and her companions in the field, she is no less pointed with the monarch.

FERDINAND

Fair princess, welcome to the court of Navarre.

PRINCESS

'Fair' I give you back again; and 'welcome' I have
 not yet: the roof of this court is too high to be
 yours; and welcome to the wide fields too base to be mine.

Poor Ferdinand is left to explain lamely what the Princess already knows of his vows, only to have that excuse flung back almost rudely in his face.

PRINCESS

...

I hear your grace hath sworn out house-keeping:
 Tis deadly sin to keep that oath, my lord,
 And sin to break it.
 But pardon me. I am too sudden-bold:
 To teach a teacher ill beseemeth me.
 Vouchsafe to read the purpose of my coming,
 And suddenly resolve me in my suit.

FERDINAND

Madam, I will, if suddenly I may.

PRINCESS

You will the sooner, that I were away;
For you'll prove perjured if you make me stay.

The Princess enjoys putting people in a bind by a deadpan acceptance of their words at face value, a tactic that becomes the *modus operandi* of the four ladies, as we can clearly see if we jump forward to the point much later in the play where they have all received their “papers” from the men.

The King has sent the Princess, as she says, the figure of “A lady walled about with diamonds” and with it “As much love in rhyme/ As would be cramm’d up in a sheet of paper,/ Writ a’ both sides of the sheet, margent and all, that he was fain to seal on Cupid’s name.” Rosaline’s rejoinder to this recalls the earlier responses of the Princess to the King: “That was a way to make his godhead wax,/ For he hath been five thousand years a boy.” Asked about what she has received, Rosaline engages in this exchange:

ROSALINE

I would you knew:
An if my face were but as fair as yours,
My favour were as great; be witness this.
Nay, I have verses too, I thank Berowne:
The numbers true; and, were the numbering too,
I were the fairest goddess on the ground:
I am compared to twenty thousand fairs.
O, he hath drawn my picture in his letter!

PRINCESS

Any thing like?

ROSALINE

Much in the letters; nothing in the praise.

PRINCESS

Beauteous as ink; a good conclusion.

We could hardly expect the two lesser swains to do any better, nor do they.

PRINCESS

But, Katharine, what was sent to you from fair Dumaine?

KATHARINE

Madam, this glove.

PRINCESS

Did he not send you twain?

KATHARINE

Yes, madam, and moreover

Some thousand verses of a faithful lover,

A huge translation of hypocrisy,

Vilely compiled, profound simplicity.

MARIA

This and these pearls to me sent Longaville:

The letter is too long by half a mile.

PRINCESS

I think no less. Dost thou not wish in heart

The chain were longer and the letter short?

MARIA

Ay, or I would these hands might never part.

PRINCESS

We are wise girls to mock our lovers so.

Why, we might ask, should it be “wisdom” in these girls to mock their lovers? Perhaps they are suspicious of love at first sight, which after all is grounded in physical attraction, it being an old truth that love’s first, fine, careless rapture has a sell-by date. Perhaps they have heeded a lesson that emerges from the widely popular *Astrophel and Stella*, where Sydney several times discusses the danger to both parties that results when a man

places his lover on a pedestal: if she descends to accept him, she's no longer the girl he took her for, and the suitor becomes one with Groucho, who wouldn't belong to a club that would have him for a member. Or maybe it's simply that they are characters in a send-up of the conventions that inform romantic comedy, a characterization of the play that will be confirmed by Berowne in the final scene. And, finally, the Princess and Rosaline offer another gloss when they cap the comments above with several riffs on the old idea that when wisdom stoops to folly it deserves all the abuse it attracts.

Whatever the case, things go no better for the guys when they come courting disguised as Muscovites, speaking phony Russian that has to be "translated" for them, and find every one of their rhetorical balloons pricked and brought to earth. The women, remember, are masked themselves and have exchanged the favors they've been sent so that each lover will woo the wrong mistress. The result is just what we should expect: the suitors are told they are hardly to be trusted, having betrayed both their sovereign and their intendeds.

More obloquy is avoided only because Armado, Costard, Holofernes, and others take the scene to present a play of the Nine Worthies. Led by Berowne, the courtiers repeatedly interrupt the presentation with rude jokes calculated to humiliate the hapless players. Chaos is about to erupt when a messenger arrives to announce that the King of France, father of the Princess, has died. When the Princess vows at once to leave that very night, Ferdinand pleads with her not to allow "the cloud of sorrow" to "[j]ostle" the "smiling suit of love" that he has pressed on her. When the Princess replies, "I understand you not, my griefs are double," Berowne, ever the spokesman, does his best to bail out all four lovers. Saying that, "Honest plain word best pierce the ear of grief," he then unfolds the most wittily convoluted and least plain of all his speeches. Here is the conclusion:

Therefore, ladies,
 Our love being yours, the error that love makes
 Is likewise yours: we to ourselves prove false,
 By being once false for ever to be true
 To those that make us both,—fair ladies, you:

And even that falsehood, in itself a sin,
Thus purifies itself and turns to grace.

The response of the Princess, couched though it is in the language of courtesy, is crushing. She turns Berowne's argument back upon itself.

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.

In short, the dolls simply could not take the guys seriously. If Ferdinand wants her to believe he is in earnest, let him withdraw alone "To some forlorn and naked hermitage." If a year of "frosts, and fasts, hard lodging and thin weeds," has not changed his "offer made in heat of blood," she will consent to be his wife. In the same vein, Longaville and Dumaine are given somewhat lighter penances and made hedged promises.

And what of Berowne, the speaker of "our" line? Rosaline has seen him in action and has altered her opinion. She now sees him as

...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 mortify this overweening wit, Rosaline would have him spend his year in a hospital, where his task will be to force smiles from the desperately sick. When Berowne objects, saying,

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

Rosaline will not relent, adding,

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 . . .

Left no out, Berowne accepts the challenge. A final rueful exchange seals love's labors for the nonce:

Berowne

Our wooing doth not end like an old play;
 Jack hath not Jill: these ladies' courtesy
 Might well have made our sport a comedy.

FERDINAND

Come, sir, it wants a twelvemonth and a day,
 And then 'twill end.

Berowne

That's too long for a play.

Indeed, *Love's Labours Lost* lives up to its name. It does not end "like an old play" or like such popular prose romances as Lodge's *Rosalinde*, on which Shakespeare was later to base *As You Like It*. The Bard's subsequent festive comedies end in "lovers' meeting," and each is rounded with a dance to celebrate the inevitable impending

nuptials. Not so here. Armado seeks Ferdinand's permission for his companions to sing the song that would have ended their play of the Nine Worthies but for the arrival of bad news from France. The song, the one that begins "When daisies pied, and violets blue," while exquisite, is not the occasion for a congratulatory dance. Rather, in its evocation of the passage from spring to winter, it reminds both players and audience of the year that must pass before there is any chance of fulfillment.

While it's possible that the four lovers of Navarre may be redeemed by their penance and win the women at the end of a year, it is painfully clear that they have lost the current campaign. All four have come with papers. Severally and corporately, they have come a cropper. If the play is not a conventional romantic comedy, it's not a tragedy, but a travesty. It is not only that the joke is on the four writers, they are the joke.

A cautionary tale for anyone who stands before the quotation on the wall behind me. Does anyone who comes here with a paper want, as he's winding down, to gaze out over the house and see—in those eyes not yet glazed over or closed—a look that says, "I say, you're a joke, Son"?