



# *Love's Labour's Lost*

by  
William Shakespeare

## Know-the-Show Audience Guide

researched and written by  
the Education Department of  
The Shakespeare Theatre  
of New Jersey





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# Love's Labour's Lost

## *An Introduction*

*Love's Labour's Lost* is probably best known for being ignored. It was originally written for an elite audience, most likely a royal celebration, and has since become one of Shakespeare's most historically neglected plays. It was performed for Queen Elizabeth in 1597, revived in 1604, and then not heard from again until 1839. That's a 235-year hiatus, and it makes *Love's Labour's Lost* the only Shakespeare play not performed at all during the 18th century. There are many reasons scholars believe that the play was outright rejected for such an extended period of time, including casting issues. As Dower and Riding state in *The Essential Shakespeare Handbook*, the play's "lack of clear leading roles made it unattractive to those theatres...which built productions around charismatic actors."

Though *Love's Labour's* is finally receiving well-deserved critical attention and performance time in the present day, it is still regarded by many audiences as a difficult play. *Love's Labour's* is considered by most critics to be a satire, and satire is almost always limited to a specific time and society. The play is overflowing with topical Elizabethan puns and cultural in-jokes which are nearly impossible to "translate" for modern viewers.

Luckily, one doesn't need to understand every word in the play to appreciate Shakespeare's amazing use of language or the clever, memorable characters he created to speak it.

***"Watching Love's Labour's Lost is like drinking champagne for the first time: unexpectedly wonderful. The play is elegant, its humor sparkling and sophisticated. And like rare wine, it was originally designed for an elite coterie."***

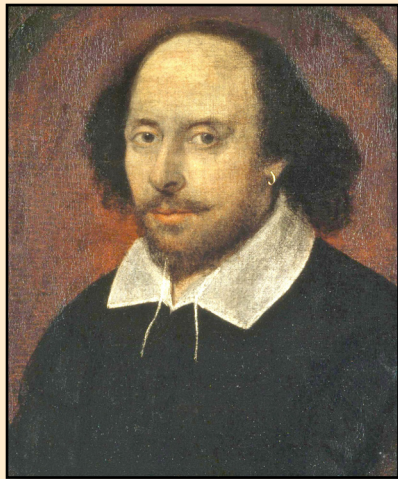
- Norrie Epstein  
*The Friendly Shakespeare*



Costume rendering for Costard as "Pompey the Great" by Nikki Delhomme for the 2015 production of *Love's Labour's Lost*.



# The Life of William Shakespeare



National Portrait Gallery, London

William Shakespeare, widely recognized as the greatest English dramatist, was born on April 23, 1564. He was the third of eight children born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire, England. Shakespeare's father was a prominent local merchant, and Shakespeare's childhood, though little is known about it for certain, appears to have been

quite normal. In fact, it seems that the young Shakespeare was allowed considerable leisure time because his writing contains extensive knowledge of hunting and hawking. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. She was eight years his senior, and the match was considered unconventional.

It is believed that Shakespeare left Stratford-on-Avon and went to London around 1588. By 1592 he was a successful actor and playwright. He wrote approximately 38 plays, two epic poems, and over 150 sonnets. His work was immensely

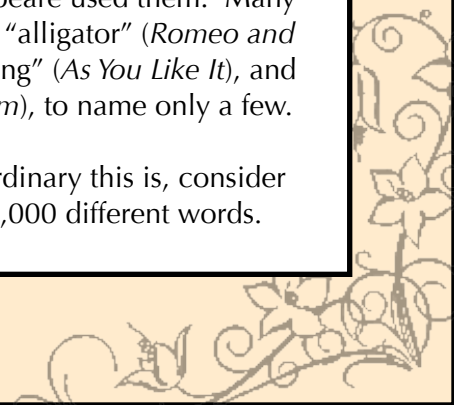
popular, appealing to members of all social spheres including Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. While they were well-liked, Shakespeare's plays were not considered by his educated contemporaries to be exceptional. By 1608, Shakespeare's involvement with theatre began to dwindle, and he spent more time at his country home in Stratford. He died in 1616 on his birthday, April 23.

Most of Shakespeare's plays found their first major publication in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, when two of his fellow actors put the plays together in the First Folio. Other early printings of Shakespeare's plays were called quartos, a printer's term referring to the format in which the publication was laid out. These quartos and the First Folio texts are the sources of all modern printings of Shakespeare's plays.

## A Man of Many Words

Shakespeare used over 20,000 different words in his plays and poems. Of these, 8.5% (approximately 1,700 words) had never been seen in print before Shakespeare used them. Many of these are still in use today, including "alligator" (*Romeo and Juliet*), "assassination" (*Macbeth*), "puking" (*As You Like It*), and "swagger" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), to name only a few.

To give you a sense of just how extraordinary this is, consider that the *King James Bible* uses only 8,000 different words.





# Love's Labour's Lost *A Synopsis*

**Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil to plot, consider skipping this section.** King Ferdinand of Navarre, along with three close friends (Berowne, Longaville, and Dumaine), decide to create a “little academe” in his royal court. They swear an oath to dedicate themselves entirely to intellectual pursuits — and to forbid any women from coming within a mile of the court — for a period of three years. Their resolve is quickly tested upon the arrival of the Princess of France with her three lovely ladies-in-waiting (Rosaline, Maria, and Katherine). The King refuses to admit them to the court, but he and his companions do visit the ladies’ camp to hear their embassy. Almost immediately, the young scholars fall in love, despite their oath.

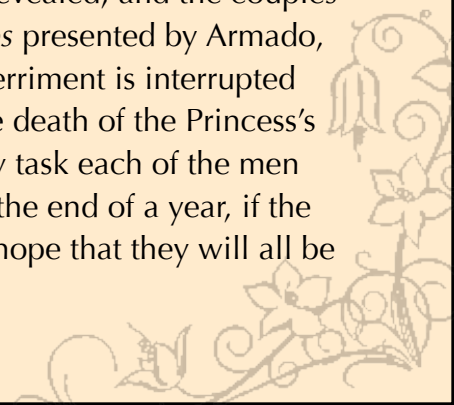
Meanwhile, Don Adriano de Armado, a Spanish braggart in attendance at the court, sends a letter to the King complaining that he has intercepted Costard (a rustic) in a compromising situation with a country maid named Jaquenetta, in violation of the King’s decree. Costard is sentenced to a week’s fasting and imprisonment under the guard of Armado. Armado later reveals to Moth (his young page) that he himself is in love with Jaquenetta, and he plans to meet her secretly.

Armado frees Costard so that the swain can deliver a letter to Jaquenetta. Along the way, Costard meets Berowne who

has a letter for Rosaline he wishes Costard to deliver. Costard accidentally mixes up the letters, delivering Rosaline’s letter to Jaquenetta, who seeks the aid of a schoolmaster (Holofernes) and a curate (Nathaniel) to read it. Realizing that the letter is from Berowne, they order Jaquenetta to quickly deliver it to the King, believing it to be an act of treason against the King’s proclaimed edicts.

Meanwhile, Berowne, pining for his love, secretly overhears the King writing a love poem to the Princess. Longaville enters and is overheard reciting his sonnet for Maria. Eventually Dumaine also enters lamenting his yet unrequited love for Katherine. Longaville steps forward to reprimand the unsuspecting Dumaine. Then the King steps forth and berates both Longaville and Dumaine. Finally, Berowne reveals himself and expresses his great disappointment in his companions, feigning an unshaken commitment to learning. His lie is revealed, however, when Jaquenetta enters with his love poem to Rosaline. The men decide to abandon their oath and dedicate themselves instead to winning the hearts of the visiting ladies of France.

The men, disguised as Muskovites, visit the women, only to be mocked by the ladies who had news of their charade. When the men return as themselves, the trickery is revealed, and the couples watch a performance of *The Nine Worthies* presented by Armado, Holofernes, Nathaniel, and Moth. The merriment is interrupted by a message from France announcing the death of the Princess’s father. As the ladies prepare to leave, they task each of the men to be true for the next twelve months. At the end of a year, if the men can hold true to their oaths, there is hope that they will all be happily reunited.



# Sources of the Play

Shakespeare most likely began writing *Love's Labour's Lost* in the late 1570s, but the version we have today seems to have not been completed until at least the 1590s. The first documented performance was in 1597, and, just before this, Shakespeare seems to have revised the play again.

Unlike the majority of Shakespeare's works, *Love's Labour's Lost* does not have any identifiable literary sources, though some speculate that he may have been inspired after reading the 1586 translation of *L'Académie Française* by Pierre de la Primaudaye. Some of the characters also seem to be at least loosely based on contemporary figures of the time. Ferdinand, the King of Navarre, seems to be based, in a small part, on young Henry IV of Navarre, who was the historical King of Navarre from 1589 to 1610. The names Berowne, Longaville, and Dumaine may have come from his notable associates: Baron de Biron, the Duc de Longueville, and the Duc de Mayenne. As in the play, the real-life King of Navarre was rumored to have started an academy in his own court, modeled on the tradition of Renaissance academies which were the fashion in the fifteenth century. It is unclear whether Henry's rules for the academy were as strict as Ferdinand's, or if his academy met with greater success than the one in the play.

As for the rest of the plot, Shakespeare may have been inspired by a notable visit that Catherine de Medici made with the court of Navarre, accompanied by a predominantly female entourage. Catherine's daughter (Princess of France Marguerite de Valois) seemed to have some sway over the King during the visit; they were married in 1572.

Several minor characters have historical roots as well. The schoolmaster (Holofernes) was at least partially based on John Florio, the Italian tutor to Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton. Shakespeare seems to have drawn from the persona of Antonio Perez, a flamboyant Spanish visitor to the English court, in creating Don Armado. The character of Armado has even more pointed historic implications though: his name is a reference to the famous Spanish Armado which was defeated by the British Navy in 1588, humiliating Spain and completely changing the power dynamics of Europe. By putting a foolish, bombastic Spaniard into the play, Shakespeare was not only satirizing Spain itself, but also commenting on the events of the day. This seeming focus on once-current events in Shakespeare's day is part of the reason the play is sometime considered difficult to understand. It is also part of what makes the play so fascinating to study or interpret.

## THE NINE WORTHIES

The masque of "The Nine Worthies" presented in *Love's Labour's Lost* takes its name from Jean de Longuyon's 14th century work *Voeux de Paon*, which lists three triads of great men of history and myth who were thought to embody the ideals of chivalry in three separate ages.

The list includes: from Pagan times, the Trojan Prince Hector, the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar, and the Greek conqueror Alexander the Great; from the Old Testament, Biblical heroes Joshua and David and the Jewish leader Judas Maccabeus; and from Christian times, the legendary King Arthur, Frankish General Charlemagne, and Crusade leader Godfrey of Bouillon. The characters in *Love's Labour's Lost*, however, substitute in Caesar's adversary Pompey the Great and the mythological demigod Hercules as members of the Nine.



# Who's Who in the Play

## THE COURT OF NAVARRE:

**FERDINAND** – the young King of Navarre; he creates a plan to turn his court into a wonder of the world, “a little academe”, as he and his companions swear a vow to devote themselves solely to intellectual pursuits for three years; later in love with the Princess of France.

**BEROWNE** – friend to the King, known for his biting wit and intellectual prowess; later in love with Rosaline.

**LONGAVILLE** – companion to the King; later in love with Maria.

**DUMAINE** – companion to the King; later in love with Katherine.



**DON ADRIANO DE ARMADO** – a Spanish braggart attending the King of Navarre; confesses his love for Jaquenetta.

**MOTH** – Armado’s young, witty page.

Costume rendering for the King of Navarre by Nikki Delhomme for the 2015 production of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.

## THE CITIZENS OF NAVARRE:

**COSTARD** – a rustic caught violating the King’s proclamation.

**JAQUENETTA** – a dairy maid.

**DULL** – a constable.

**HOLOFERNES** – a schoolmaster with an extravagant use of language.

**NATHANIEL** – a curate; companion to Holofernes.

**A FORESTER.**

## THE COURT OF FRANCE:

**PRINCESS OF FRANCE** – an upright, intelligent, and lovely woman sent by her father to negotiate with the King of Navarre.

**ROSALINE** – a smart and witty lady attending the Princess.

**MARIA** – a lady attending the Princess.

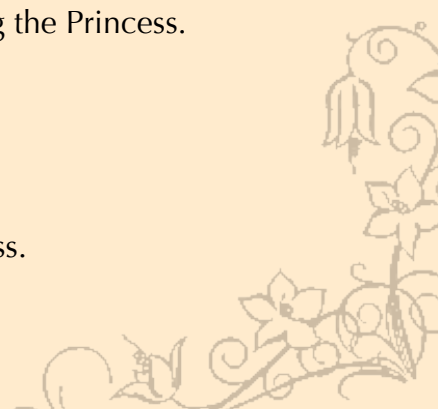
**KATHERINE** – a lady attending the Princess.

**BOYET** – a French lord attending the Princess.

**MARCADÉ** – a French messenger.



Costume rendering for Holofernes (the School Master) by Nikki Delhomme for the 2015 production of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.





# Changing Views on Love's Labour's Lost

*"...it is one of the worst of Shakespeare's plays, nay I think I may say the very worst."*

Charles Gildon (1710)

*"Often entangled and obscure, with much of it so vulgar that it ought not have been performed before a maiden queen...[with] many sparks of genius."*

Samuel Johnson (1765)

*Love's Labour's Lost has "no incident, no situation, no interest of any kind; the whole play is, literally and exclusively, 'a play on words.'"*

J.A. Heraud (1865)

The Language of Love's Labour's Lost

*"...the more one reads the play, the more one is caught up by the extraordinary excitement it expresses about what language can do – the excitement of the historical moment when English, in the hands of its greatest master, suddenly can do anything."*

C.L. Barber (1959)

Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom

*"Love's Labour's Lost is a festival of language, an exuberant fireworks display in which Shakespeare seems to seek the limits of his verbal resources, and discovers that there are none."*

Harold Bloom (1998)

Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human

## ON ENJOYING THE COMEDIES

*"Because comedies rely on 'fancy-meeting-you-here' coincidences and unrealistic plot devices, people tend to dismiss them as frothy confections inferior in-depth and substance to tragedy. You indulge in comedy but suffer with tragedy. Shakespearean comedy, however, raises the same issues as tragedy, only in a different key and, of course, with a different conclusion. Lear is exiled on the heath, just as Rosalind and Celia are banished to the Forest of Arden. The tragic tale of Romeo and Juliet becomes comedy in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Appreciation depends upon entering the comic world and accepting its artifice, no matter how improbable. On one level, you can uncritically accept comedies, simply enjoying them for their silliness; on another, you can look further and see how Shakespeare uses comic absurdities to suggest profound human values and concerns. The comic world, with its fortuitous encounters, is a well-orchestrated community where everyone is potentially a brother or a sister. Similarly, their concluding marriages are not simply forced happy endings, but a reflection of the human need to solemnize experiences."*

-Norrie Epstein, The Friendly Shakespeare

## EMBRACE YOUR INNER CHILD

*"In our image-oriented era, Love's Labour's Lost refreshingly challenges our verbal skills. The fact that the modern theatregoer will not understand every word or all the puns in this play does not exclude him or her from the fun; it merely places the theatregoer in the position of the child, and children are remarkably receptive to Shakespeare in performance. Unlike most adults, the child doesn't erect a mental block at the sound of every familiar word; the child rather intuits meaning from context without worrying about possible inexactitudes."*

- Felicia Hardison Londre, Love's Labour's Lost: Critical Essays



# The Language of *Love's Labour's Lost*

*Love's Labour's Lost* is, more than anything else, a play about language. Through his diverse characters, most notably Don Armado, Holofernes, and Berowne, Shakespeare examines the various ways in which language can be used – to good, bad, and ridiculous ends.

Don Armado, a foreigner, joyfully experiments with language, not always observing the rules and never saying something simply when he can construct a more elaborate phrase. Holofernes, on the other hand, tries to be unbearably precise, flaunting his classical education by randomly interjecting Latin words and phrases into his speech. Finally, there is Berowne, who is almost certainly the greatest wit of the play, but never seems entirely sincere. He can and will argue any case simply for the sake of showing off his intellect, and his declaration of love for Rosaline, though articulate, may prove to be nothing but linguistic exercises. However, Rosaline herself is just as clever, and the audience has reason to believe that she is capable of beating Berowne at his own game.

## **QUIBBLING**

*Love's Labour's Lost* is filled with wordplay-filled mock-debates, also known as **quibbles** or **quibbling**, which drive much of the action of the play.

Shakespeare also uses language to explore the meaning of love. As Norrie Epstein puts it in *The Friendly*

Shakespeare, “the play asks if language can be a mouthpiece of the heart.” One of the central issues of *Love's Labour's Lost* is the difference between what a person says and what they do. For example, the men say they will study for three years, but they forget their vow entirely when they meet the ladies. Then they say (in impressive poetic language) that they are deeply in love with the ladies and will do anything to be with them – even dedicate themselves to difficult tasks for a year. But who is to say whether they will prove able to keep their oaths this time? Most of the play's figurative language revolves around images of eyes and tongues, which seems to signify that Berowne and the other men experience superficial love at first sight, and they speak eloquently of love, but ultimately they are unable to express how they actually feel. Shakespeare seems to be saying that language alone – though it was certainly his own greatest tool – cannot be a substitute for genuine feeling.



Costume rendering for Berowne by Nikki Delhomme for the 2015 production of *Love's Labour's Lost*.



# Food for Thought

## HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

*Love's Labour's Lost* concludes with the hope of future love (and marriage), but not a wedding as seen in Shakespeare's other comedies. In some ways it can feel like a season finale cliff-hanger. Did Shakespeare intend more for these couples?

Scholars have long referred to a sequel to *Love's Labour's Lost*, entitled *Love's Labour's Won*. The title is mentioned in Francis Mere's *Palladis Tamia, Wits Treasury*, and is also listed next to *Love's Labour's Lost* on the inventory of Christopher Hunt, an Elizabethan bookseller. Could this be a lost work from Shakespeare and a happy ending for the couples?

Most scholars believe that this was merely the working title of another play which may have evolved away from the characters in the original.

Costume rendering for Rosaline by Nikki Delhomme for the 2015 production of *Love's Labour's Lost*.



If one looks at the rest of Shakespeare's comedies, the likely contender is *Much Ado About Nothing*. The characters of Berowne and Rosaline can be seen echoed in Benedick and Beatrice. Constable Dull can easily be seen to become Dogberry. It is a mystery to which we may never truly have an answer.

## EUPHUISM

*Love's Labour's Lost* is known for the complexity of its language, and often it seems that Shakespeare is, as Harry Levin puts it, "commandeer[ing] artifice as a weapon against artificiality"; that is, saying flowery, pretentious things as a means of satirizing people who say flowery, pretentious things. Specifically, Shakespeare may have been mocking the practice of Euphuism, a courtly fad during Shakespeare's day. Euphuism was a method of speech that explored the boundaries of language by using rhyming, alliteration, complicated metaphors, mythological allusions, and words taken from the classical languages of Latin and Greek to create hopelessly complicated expressions. Characters like Berowne, Holofernes, and Don Armado would certainly fit right in with the Euphuistic noblemen of the late 1570s; and Shakespeare plays their pompous, ornate styles of speech to great comic effect.



# Commentary & Criticism

**THE MOST ELIZABETHAN COMEDY:** “*Love’s Labour’s Lost* is the playwright’s most mannered and profoundly Elizabethan comedy, replete with witty debates, dazzling wordplay, and strongly drawn comic characters.”

– Leslie Dunton-Donwer & Alan Riding,  
*The Essential Shakespeare Handbook* (2004)

**A NEW-BORN COMEDIC STYLE:** “In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, the fancy for the most part runs wild as the wind, and the structure of the story is as that of a house of clouds which the wind builds and unbuilds at pleasure. Here we find a riot of rhymes, winds and wanton in their half-grown grace as a troupe of young satyrs, tender-hoofed and ruddy-horned; during certain scenes we seem almost to stand again at the cradle of new-born comedy, and hear the first lisping and laughing accents run over from the baby lips in bubbling rhyme; but when the note changes, we recognize the speech of the gods. For the first time in our literature the higher key of poetic and romantic comedy is finely touched on a fine issue.”

– Algernon Charles Swinburne (1875)

**THE LANGUAGE:** “*Love’s Labour’s Lost* is a witty, lively, romantic comedy that contains some of the most exuberant and fantastic language Shakespeare ever composed.”

– Dr. Barbara A. Mowat,  
*Love’s Labour’s Lost: The Folger Edition* (1996)

**THE SOUL OF BEAUTY:** “*Love’s Labour’s Lost* gives us entrée into a Renaissance-era lifestyles-of-the-rich-and-famous, golden world of beautiful people—young, attractive, clever, sophisticated people—who ultimately sense that beauty really resides in the soul and must be cultivated there.”

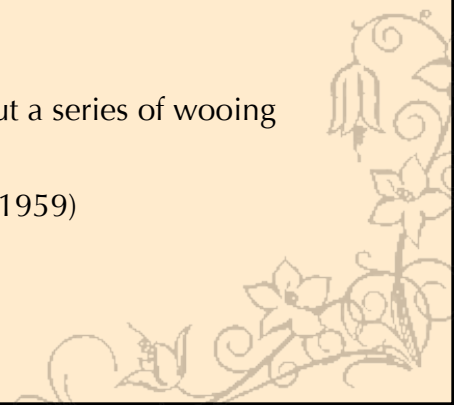
– Felicia Hardison Londre,  
*Love’s Labour’s Lost: The Critical Essays* (1997)

**THE MORAL OF THE PLAY:** “The thorough worthlessness of wit and talent when exclusively directed to festive and social amusement... The highest splendor and pleasures of life, wit and talents, without the earnestness and profundity which a thoughtful mind lends to them, are a mere false tinsel; while learning and science, abstracted from, and undirected to the realities of life, are equally worthless and unsubstantial.”

– Hermann Ulrici (1839)

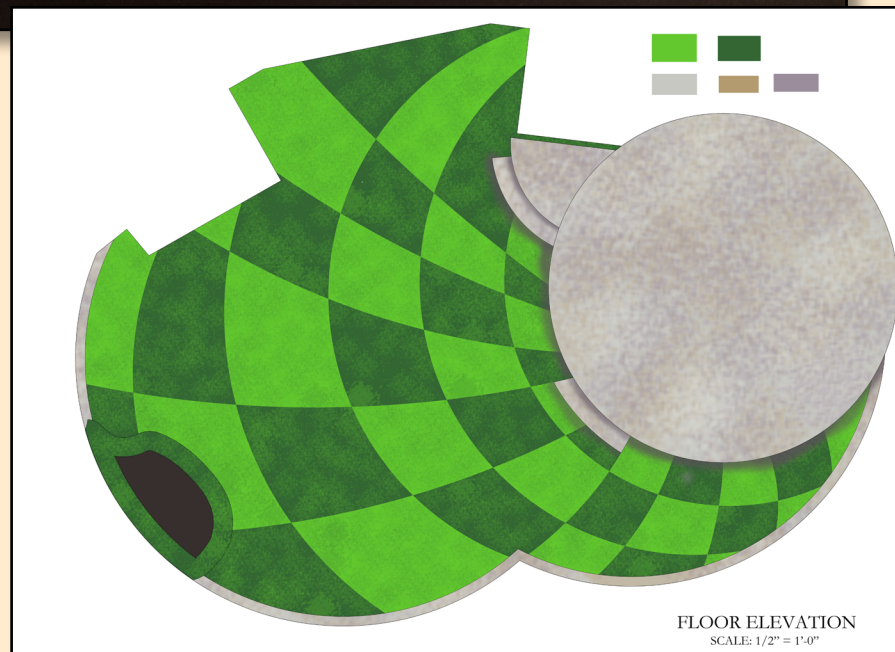
**WOONG GAMES:** “The play is not a story, but a series of wooing games.”

– Cesar Lombardi Barber (1959)





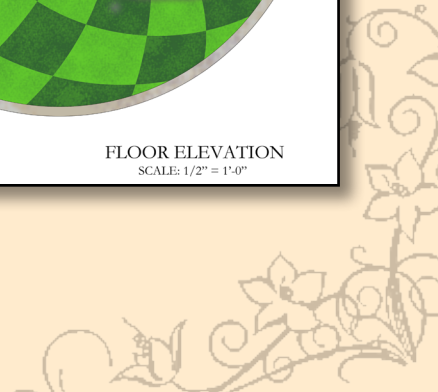
# In this Production



Above: Costume designs for the Princess of France (left) and Don Adriano de Armado (right) by Nikki Delhomme.

Top Right: A "White Model" of the set for *Love's Labour's Lost*, designed by Charlie Calvert.

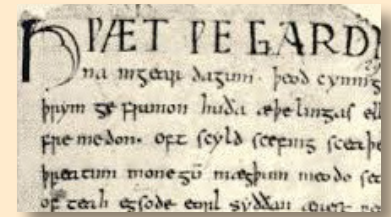
Lower Right: Paint Elevations for the stage floor of *Love's Labour's Lost* by Charlie Calvert.



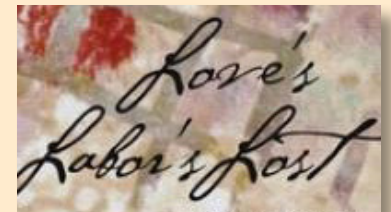


## Explore Online

A link to selected YouTube videos where one can hear the difference between Old English and Middle English; a far cry from the Early Modern English in which Shakespeare wrote.  
[www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL071DC49FD027E2A2](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL071DC49FD027E2A2)



A link to the Folger Shakespeare Library's *Love's Labour's Lost* page  
[www.folger.edu/loves-labors-lost](http://www.folger.edu/loves-labors-lost)



A link to the Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust website  
[Shakespeare.org.uk](http://Shakespeare.org.uk)





# Sources & Further Reading

THE ANNOTATED SHAKESPEARE, Introductions, Notes, and  
Bibliography by A.L. Rowe

THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE: LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST, edited by  
H.R. Woudhuysen

A READER'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE by Muriel B. Ingham

ASIMOV'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE by Isaac Asimov

THE COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE, by Laurie  
Rozakis

FREEING SHAKESPEARE'S VOICE by Kristin Linklater

THE FRIENDLY SHAKESPEARE by Norrie Epstein

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST: The Cambridge Edition, edited by  
William C. Carroll

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST: THE CRITICAL ESSAYS, Felicia  
Hardison Londre

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST: The Folger Edition, edited by  
Dr. Barbara A. Mowat

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST: The Oxford Edition, edited by George  
R. Hibbard

SHAKESPEARE A TO Z by Charles Boyce

SHAKESPEARE AFTER ALL by Marjorie Garber

SHAKESPEARE FOR BEGINNERS by Brandon Toropov

SHAKESPEARE FOR DUMMIES by Doyle, Lischner, and Dench

SHAKESPEARE IN PERFORMANCE, Consultant Editors Keith  
Parsons and Pamela Mason

SHAKESPEARE: THE INVENTION OF THE HUMAN by Harold  
Bloom

SHAKESPEARE OUR CONTEMPORARY by Jan Kott

THEATRE: A WAY OF SEEING, Third Edition by Milly S.  
Barranger

THE ESSENTIAL SHAKESPEARE HANDBOOK, by Leslie Dunton-  
Downer and Alan Riding

