

Shakespeare's Critique of Philosopher Kings in *Love's Labours Lost*

Abstract: Several commentators have suggested that Shakespeare was a proponent of Platonic political philosophy. However, this paper will argue that Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost* is a sharp critique of the Platonic idea of the philosopher king. Navarre is a political ruler dedicated to a life of contemplation. Shakespeare reveals in the course of the romantic interplay between Navarre's court and the visiting Princess of France that the attempt to unite political rule and the philosophic life is misguided and untenable as it leads to a life-denying asceticism. Moreover, given the clear parallel to the actual Henry of Navarre, who famously abjured his Calvinist faith in order to become King of Catholic France, *Love's Labours Lost* reflects Shakespeare's concern that certain strains of Christianity encouraged unhealthy asceticism and promoted religious conflict. Shakespeare's commentary about the underlying connection between philosophic asceticism and religious fanaticism lies at the heart of the play.

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association at the University of Calgary on June 1, 1016.

Shakespeare is often seen in certain circles as a proponent of Platonic political philosophy (Bloom 1993: 269, 408; Craig 2001: 4, 21, 251; Bloom and Jaffa 1964: 7). In this paper I wish to challenge this notion by arguing that in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the play in which Shakespeare arguably deals most directly with philosophy, he is deeply critical of perhaps the most distinctive feature of Plato's political theory; namely, the proposal for philosopher kings in the *Republic*. In this comedy the King of Navarre and a small group of courtiers withdraw from active politics, not to mention normal social life, in order to dedicate three years to intensive philosophic study. Shakespeare's comic genius in this play punctures the moral and intellectual pretensions of these would-be modern philosopher kings.

Love's Labour's Lost presents a two-fold critique of Platonic philosophy both in terms of the philosopher kings of the *Republic* and with respect to what Shakespeare takes to be, following Aristophanes, the ridiculous asceticism associated with the philosophic life epitomised by Socrates. For Shakespeare, the philosopher kings signify the extremism of a vision of philosophic education that is austere and unerotic. Knowledge, the poet suggests, requires a robust dose of sensuality and recognition of the erotic attachments that support healthy social and political life. In the person of the King of Navarre, the ostensible protagonist of the play, Shakespeare also evokes the image of the bitter religious wars in Europe through the unmistakable parallel to the Huguenot King Henry IV, who famously abjured his Calvinist faith in order to secure his rule of Catholic France. It is rare in Shakespeare's plays to portray living political figures, not to mention an actual king as a central character. Unlike the contemplative Prospero, the fictional Duke of Milan surrounded by his books on a desert island in *The Tempest*, the King of Navarre in *Love's Labour's Lost* is a recognizable political figure to Shakespeare's audience. Shakespeare presents his real King of Navarre as the embodiment of the ascetic tendencies in Platonic rationalism that only contribute to the religious fanaticism of early modern Europe bitterly divided on sectarian grounds. By drawing on the context of Henry IV, Shakespeare introduces Christian theology as a radicalizing element added to classical philosophy that converts the austere warrior philosophers of the *Republic* into the ridiculous, misogynistic feudal scholar monks of *Love's Labour's Lost*. He also, however, follows the classical comic poet Aristophanes in portraying negatively the apolitical Socratic existence by presenting an argument for moderation that critiques Socrates' secession from normal political and social existence. As with Aristophanes' savage satirizing of Socrates in his play *The Clouds*, in which philosophy is cast as an activity beyond the fringe of decent society, Shakespeare also presents the philosopher as a figure of ridicule with a cultish following of disciples. Through the course of the education and romantic interplay in *Love's Labour's Lost* Navarre realizes that philosophic rationalism does not transcend sectarianism or supply the moderate principles of civil legislation necessary for human flourishing. Rather it is love or *eros* that Shakespeare offers as the vivid political metaphor symbolizing the importance of charity, tolerance and consent.

The central claim in *Love's Labour's Lost* is about the superiority of poetry over philosophy. This is a unique comedy insofar as it does not conclude with the standard happy coupling. In fact, Shakespeare ends this play with a number of failed or suspended courtships. The comic spirit, however, is expressed in the victory of poetry over philosophy in several senses. First, Shakespeare's poetry corrects the excesses of philosophical asceticism. Beauty, pleasure and love, central concerns of poetry, assume natural sociability, and thus support moderate juridical principles that do not do violence to the human material in society. Second,

the centrality of oaths and promise keeping in the play raises serious questions about the source of moral obligation (whether it is external with God and law or in the internal order of soul) and reveals Shakespeare's concern that in early modern Christianity philosophy has often been subsumed by theology to produce a fanatical approach to morality and punishment.¹ In contrast to the brutalizing alliance of rationalist philosophy and sectarian religion, Shakespeare offers the possibility for a poetic reconstruction of community on the basis of friendship, consent and healthy erotic attachments. Finally, Shakespeare's claim for the superiority of his poetry over Plato's philosophy derives from his capacity to bring the abstract philosophy of Plato and the historical reality of religious sectarianism in Europe together in the dramatic setting of Navarre's court, a feat only made possible by the poet's imaginative art. Indeed, the play invites the audience to participate as the erstwhile philosopher kings of *Love's Labour's Lost* are given the opportunity to experience Shakespeare's poetic education with the promise that they, and the audience, may acquire a measure of political and religious moderation.

A Philosopher King in Navarre?

Love's Labour's Lost is unique among Shakespeare's plays in several senses. Few of them literally begin with a king's speech and none are about living kings familiar to Shakespeare's contemporaries. Thus, the psychology of rulers is clearly a theme of the play. However, Navarre stands out among Shakespeare's kings in that he alone explicitly dedicates himself and his companions to a period of contemplative life. In order to understand Shakespeare's intention in this play we have to consider both the Platonic account of philosophy and the significance of religious sectarianism in Europe of Shakespeare's time.

Arguably the two most memorable presentations of philosophy in antiquity were Plato's account of philosopher kings in the *Republic* and Aristophanes' comic critique of Socrates, hero of the Platonic dialogues, in his play *The Clouds*. The peak of Plato's argument for the city in speech in the *Republic* is the famous statement that: "Until philosophers rule as kings in their cities, or those who are nowadays called kings and leading men become genuine and adequate philosophers so that political power and philosophy become thoroughly blended together, while the numerous natures that now pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils."² In the *Republic* Socrates argues that philosophers enjoy perfectly ordered tripartite souls by virtue of their education in moderation, courage, justice and wisdom. Their claim to rule is based upon their unique intellectual capacity to rationally apprehend "divine patterns" of justice that can be applied to the affairs of the city. Philosophic rule rests on the notion that not all great political questions can be resolved, or even understood, solely on the basis of experience (Nichols 1987: 123). Philosophers emerge from the rigorous education in music (poetry) and gymnastics (physical education) that produced the spirited warrior class of tough, austere and unsentimental soldiers. Control of sexual passions is central to the early philosophic education of the *Republic*, in which public control of erotics famously culminated in the ritualized eugenics program in Book V. Socrates' insistence in the *Republic* that the poets, especially Homer, need to be censored in order to discourage superstition among the warriors reveals the deep rivalry between poetry and philosophy over which will provide the authoritative teachers on moral issues (Rep 376d-403d). By this account, it is only a select few among the warrior class who will ever go on to pursue a full philosophic education including the study of mathematics, astronomy, and practice in dialectics (Rep 522e-541b).

The ease with which philosopher kings are created in the free flowing and abstract character of *logos* in the dialogue of the *Republic* belies a number of difficult practical and logical problems in Plato's account. To start, philosophic education presupposes conditions only made possible by the class structure of the city in speech. This chicken and egg problem is compounded by Plato's assertion that any non-tragic reading of politics depends upon the possibility of philosopher kings. Yet, as Socrates admits, in most actual cities philosophers are dismissed as useless or vicious (Rep 487d). Moreover, Socrates suggests that the contemplative life is so enjoyable and satisfying that philosophers would likely need to be coerced to serve the city as rulers. Finally, even within the rarefied dialectical structure of the *Republic* philosophic rule inevitably corrupts and leads to the terrible decline of regimes into tyranny in Books 8 and 9.

Aristophanes' comic counterpart to Platonic philosopher kings presents another set of problems for the possibility of philosophic rule. His play *The Clouds* reminds us that the actuality of philosophy in the *polis* was Socrates, not the exalted Guardians of the *Republic*. Aristophanes ridiculed Socrates' philosophic school or "thinkery" as a magnet for followers who resemble a fanatical religious cult marked by contempt for honest work, and thus condemned to a life of poverty and petty crime (Aristophanes 1984). The portrait of philosophy skilfully and caustically drawn by Aristophanes is a profoundly communal activity. Perhaps Aristophanes' sharpest insights relate to his sense of the fundamentally sectarian instincts among philosophers and their disciples who typically hive themselves off into warring schools. Aristophanes' Socrates is also a ridiculous figure expounding quack science and pedantic nonsense. The one prominent common link between the august philosopher kings of the *Republic* and the ridiculous denizens of Socrates' thinkery is asceticism. The deep austerity and anti-materialism of the philosophic life in both instances presents philosophy in terms of a quasi-religious experience. As we shall see, the ascetic tendency of philosophy is a theme that Shakespeare draws heavily upon in *Love's Labours' Lost*.

However, in this play Shakespeare sidesteps the twin problems of coercion and crushing poverty by focussing on the second of the two possibilities put forth in the *Republic*; namely, an existing ruler who genuinely philosophizes.³ The philosopher king of *Love's Labour's Lost* is not a son of the Greek *polis*, but rather a scion of the early modern feudal aristocracy. Scholars are largely agreed that "Ferdinand" the King of Navarre is almost certainly based upon King Henry of Navarre (Hibbard 1990: 49, Taylor 1966: 23, David 1961: xxviii).⁴ Indeed, the name Ferdinand never appears in the dialogue of the play, and thus Shakespeare's audience in the 1590's understandably assumed that the King of Navarre is their contemporary Henry. He was ruler of the strategically located principality of Navarre bridging northern Spain and southern France. From 1589-1610 he was also King Henry IV of France becoming the first of the Bourbon line through inheritance from his father's side. In a period of intense religious war and theological controversy, Henry was a veritable lightning rod for conflict, the figure at the center of a perfect storm of political and religious hatred. That is to say, as the Protestant King of Navarre who abjured his Calvinist faith in order to secure the throne of Catholic France, famously declaring that "Paris is well worth a mass," Henry was a symbol of the religious schisms then ravaging Europe in Shakespeare's time.

Henry was popular in England in the early years of his reign when Queen Elizabeth I sent English troops to support him in his civil war against the Catholic League. However, his July 1593 conversion to Catholicism was seen as a betrayal to Protestants in England and across

Europe. There is little doubt that Henry's abjuration of Calvinism was very much on Shakespeare's mind as he has the Princess of France at one point in the play cry "Saint Denis to Saint Cupid!"⁵ This allusion to Saint Denis recalls not only the patron saint of France but also the town of St. Denis which was the site of Henry's official conversion (Love 2001: 287-88). Most scholars conclude that *Love's Labour's Lost* was composed as early as 1594 and first performed at court in 1597. Thus it is thought to have been written after Henry's abjuration. The question for us, then, is why did Shakespeare write a comedy that had as its central character a French king and notorious religious convert, who supposedly dedicated his entire court to the study of philosophy and the contemplative life? The answer lies in the text of the play to which we now turn.

What is Philosophy?

Navarre's opening speech sets the scene for the play by laying out the basis for a certain conception of philosophic rule and contemplative community. There are two main elements in Navarre's account of philosophy, which are in considerable tension with one another. The first element is Navarre's statement about the relation between philosophy and politics: "Let fame, that all hunt after in their lives,/ Live register'd upon our brazen tombs,/ And then grace us in the disgrace of death;/ When spite of cormorant devouring Time,/ Th' endeavour of this present breath may buy/ That honor which shall bate his scythe's keen edge,/ And make us heirs of all Eternity" (1.1.1-7). Here Navarre sets out a philosophical alternative to the Machiavellian promise of eternal fame through the glorious and memorable achievements of political rule with daring and *virtù*. With Navarre, Shakespeare introduces us to a ruler who seeks fame from the reputation of the intellectual life of his court, or "little academe" (1.1.13). By transforming his court into a venue "still and contemplative in living art," Navarre seeks the Machiavellian end of fame and glory through decidedly unpolitical, even apolitical, means. Why does Navarre believe that turning his court into a philosophic academy will make them "heirs of all eternity"? Achieving eternity could mean fame for participating in rational apprehension of the timeless and unchanging Platonic ideas or forms. The profundity of knowledge about these fundamental, yet elusive, principles of intelligibility would contrast with the relative banality of the temporally limited accounts of reality that pass for wisdom in normal political judgment. Navarre's triumphalist opening remarks could also signify his presumption that experiencing a period of intense philosophic study will result in exemplary political rule by him. In either possibility, Shakespeare's association of the desire for fame with the drive for intellectual purity places philosophy, at least in part, in service to political goals.

The second major element in Navarre's opening speech has to do with Shakespeare's explanation of the relation between philosophy and *eros*. Navarre radicalizes the already considerable austerity woven into Plato's account of philosopher kings. Navarre exhorts his men as "Brave conquerors" to engage in war with their "own affections" (1.1.12). While Navarre insists upon the three year vow in his academy dealing with celibacy, fasting, and sleep deprivation, he offers no reason why these strictures are actually necessary for philosophic education. Navarre's assumption appears to be that asceticism is not only instrumental to, but rather the core experience of, philosophic education. The hostility to sensuality among these would-be philosophers is decidedly monkish and theological. Indeed, Shakespeare presents this asceticism as fanatical and worthy only of ridicule or contempt. For instance, one rule of

Navarre's Academy is that "No woman shall come within a mile of my court...on pain of losing her tongue" (1.1.120). As Breitenberg observes, Navarre and his men unite in opposition "to the idea of women as linked to a debased corporeality" (1996: 136-7). In addition to the stark misogyny underlying Navarre's philosophic project, Shakespeare's allusion to such savage punishments reminds his audience of Europe's brutal religious wars and persecutions.

The deep conflict between knowledge and *eros* in Navarre's presentation of philosophy is problematic on several levels. First, it is not at all clear that Navarre and his followers have fully thought through the difficulty of constructing a community by artifice on the basis of a purely intellectual understanding of moral obligation. Most of Navarre's companions are unaware that there is any difficulty here at all. Longaville boasts that "The mind shall banquet though the body pine," while Dumaine insists "To love, to wealth, to pomp, I pine and die/ With all these living in philosophy" (1.1.25, 31-32). Only Berowne, the voice of poetry amongst the philosophers, rebels against the attempt to expel all forms of sensuality and erotic attachment from the community of philosophers: "O, these barren tasks, too hard to keep,/ Not to see ladies, study, fast, not sleep!" (1.1.47-8). As Berowne implies, there is something profoundly unnatural about a community devoid of erotic and political attachments, arguably the two most powerful forms of human connection. This is in effect a community of artifice united through an act of sheer will expressed by compact lacking the fortifying strength of pleasure and affection. Moreover, Shakespeare has Navarre and his courtiers, with the exception of Berowne, adopt the style and rhetoric of religious fanatics, although their pledge is ostensibly to a philosophical truth rather than a confessional one. Indeed, Navarre's project seems to depend on the possibility that philosophical rationalism can in fact transcend sectarian differences. Perhaps this points to Navarre's initial motivation insofar as there is some logic to the Huguenot King confronting the challenge of ruling a Catholic people by turning to the universalist and rationalist claims of philosophy.

While Navarre and his men present their philosophic project as, at least in part, in service to political goals, it seems to result in the formation of a strangely apolitical community bound by rules adopted from monkish extreme discipline. Shakespeare's philosophic court in the opening scenes of *Love's Labour's Lost* is more bookish than the authentic Socratic experience of engagement with fellow citizens and other interlocutors in the *agora*. In this sense, Shakespeare's account of philosophy more closely resembles the budding philosopher Guardians of Books 5 and 6 of the *Republic* than in the dialogic activity of the Socrates portrayed in the dialogues. The one common theme uniting the ideal of philosopher kings with the life of Socrates, the hero of the Platonic dialogues, is an abiding asceticism and distrust of material needs and desires. It is the ascetic core of what he takes to be Platonic philosophy that Shakespeare, like Aristophanes before him, identified as the fertile source of comedy. Under the poet's skilful hand, these moralistic and ascetic philosophers cannot help but succumb to perjury and hypocrisy.

What is a little perjury among friends?

Love's Labour's Lost foreshadows the state of nature portrayed by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The action and dialogue take place entirely out of doors in a natural setting suffused with the latent possibility, and suppressed reality, of political artifice. Strangely in a play

populated by kings, lords and ladies, the presence of sovereign power is quite obscure, but soon after the opening scene political reality and erotic necessity puncture the philosophic pretensions of Navarre and his men. The scheduled arrival of the Princess of France and her retinue is the first intrusion into the bucolic academy. Reflecting upon his harsh decree banning women from the court, Navarre sighs “What say you lords? Why this was quite forgot” (1.1.140). With the Princess condemned to holding court *alfresco* the inhospitable king exhibits his first instance of the philosopher’s neglect of political duty as Shakespeare presents the conflicting tendencies when philosophic dogmatism confronts practical diplomacy. The second early challenge to the viability of Navarre’s philosophic court comes from the clown Costard’s apprehension by the Spaniard Armado for consorting with Jaquenetta in violation of Navarre’s strict orders against fraternization. However, the penalty of a year’s imprisonment for being “taken with a wench” (1.1.282) is reduced by the king to a one week fast with only “bran and water” (1.1.295). Clearly, the threat of dire punishment was little deterrent to fairly harmless “crimes” driven by erotic attraction. The ascetic code of conduct underlying Navarre’s contemplative society begins to unravel practically as soon as it is promulgated.

Indeed, the very first serious questioning of Navarre’s project arose from the nature of the oath binding the community of scholars. Berowne’s reluctance to sign on to the three year commitment on such harsh terms exposed the problematic features of the oath. Extension of the celibacy principle to its logical limits would mean no generation of new life, a fate in keeping with the sterile and unerotic condition of the academy. Berowne’s aversion to the dogmatism of the oath signifies his awareness that political reality requires recognizing certain necessities. As he claims: “Necessity will make us all forsworn” (1.1.149). There is the political necessity for the small principality of Navarre to establish good relations with its powerful neighbor France. And we know from the historical context of the play, there was also the necessity to recognize religious sensitivities in the meeting of a Protestant king (or recent convert from Protestantism) and a princess representing one of Europe’s great Catholic powers.

As Shakespeare was well aware, oaths can be associated with both civil law and religious vows. Oaths often blur the distinction between the civil and religious spheres. With Navarre and his court this is certainly the case. The social compact normally contains elements that are purged from Navarre’s community, especially that mixture of law and *eros* contained in the marriage vow. As Berowne’s reluctance to sign the oath reveals, covenants can also expose the limits of friendship. The central problem Shakespeare sets before the audience revolves around the question: Is a vow to philosophise fundamentally misguided? Here Shakespeare foreshadows Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s charge that with their social compact theory Hobbes and Locke turn every individual in the state of nature into a philosopher (Rousseau 1964: 102). The Princess ridicules “Navarre and his book-men” (2.1.225) for apparently failing to understand that social bonds are largely emotional, erotic, familial and possibly even sectarian too.⁶ But even if pleasure is the natural support for obligation, hedonic considerations do not establish who or what vouchsafes an oath or what punishment there is for promise breaking. This, properly speaking, raises the philosophic question of soul. Oaths could be enforced by external agency such as God or the civil authorities. Strangely Navarre makes no mention of God directly, but he does affirm the value of severe punishments including imprisonment, mutilation and death. Audiences could not help but be aware of the connection between Henry of Navarre’s abjuration of Calvinism and Navarre’s perjury in the play (Hibbard 1990: 51). Oaths can also be enforced by internal factors, most notably concern for the order or harmony of one’s soul. While Navarre

and his followers soon come to the realization that the pleasure of contemplating one's glory and fame pales in comparison to the joys of romantic love, it is only through the course of the play that they gradually become aware, however imperfectly, that proper order of one's soul is crucially dependant on *eros* in the form of attachment with, and openness to, another self.

The turning point in the play is the wonderfully improbable and comic discovery scene in which Navarre and his courtiers each inadvertently expose their desire for one of their French female visitors. Navarre in love with the Princess, and Berowne in love with Rosaline, are especially tormented souls far removed from the well-honed psychic balance of Plato's philosopher kings. Berowne exclaims: "This love is as mad as Ajax. It kills sheep; it kills me, I a sheep" (4.3.6). Navarre moans: "O paradox! Black is the badge of Hell,/ The hue of dungeons, and the school of night;/ And beauty's crest becomes heaven's well" (4.3.250). The discovery scene creates a new basis for the union of Navarre and his men; that is as a community of hypocrites equally false to their promise. The basic contradiction confronting these perjurers is not lost on them. How can those who have broken faith be trusted to honor new pledges? Berowne queries: "If love makes me forsworn, how shall I swear to love?" (4.2.105). Longaville complains of his love Maria: "Did not the heavenly rhetoric of thine eye...Persuade my heart to this false perjury?" (4.3.60). However, it is precisely in the idea of "heavenly" or divine beauty that Longaville discovers the romantic casuistry to set his conscience at peace: "If by me broke, what fool is not so wise/ To lose an oath to win a paradise?" (4.3.70).

Yet it would be to Berowne, spokesman for poetry in the play, that Shakespeare leaves the most complete and powerful "salve for perjury" (4.3.284). In his famous Promethean Fire speech Berowne offered the men a series of arguments to defend forsaking their oaths. First, he advances the unnaturalness of ascetic philosophy and the extreme privations it seems to require: "To fast, to study, and to see no woman--/Flat treason 'gainst the kingly state of youth" (4.3.288). If it were wrong for healthy young men to act upon their desires, then why did nature or God make these desires so powerful? Second, Berowne insists upon the erotic ground of education. Romantic love emerges as the experience that provides the mirror to the self for one only becomes fully cognizant of one's soul through intimate connection with another: "From woman's eyes this doctrine I derive:/ They sparkle still the right Promethean Fire;/ They are the books, the arts, the academes,/ That show, contain, and nourish all the world,/ Else none at all in aught proves excellent" (4.4.347-51). We notice the link Shakespeare establishes between romantic love and the mythical discovery of the arts and sciences thanks to Prometheus with the important difference being Berowne's attribution not to a male hero/god, but rather to a mortal female lover. "Beauty's tutors" allow for self-discovery through erotic attachment to another self as mirror of the soul: "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" (4.3.308-11).

Berowne articulates the explicit link between love and poetry insisting that love "hath taught me to rhyme, and to be melancholy" (4.3.12-3). For Berowne romantic love is a form of education superior to the study of books because love animates the soul and enhances the perceptive powers of all of the senses. The cloistered book knowledge of Navarre's court is, according to Berowne, "leaden contemplation" that never leaves the brain of "barren practicers" (4.3.318), but "love, first learned in a lady's eyes" gives "to every power a double power,/ Above their functions and their offices" (4.3.324, 328-9). Berowne also acknowledges the religious

commitments implicit in Navarre's oath, but reverses the thrust of Navarre's original reasoning to come to the conclusion that *eros* or love is the instrument that the divine employs to produce justice in the world: "And when love speaks, the voice of all the gods/ Make heaven drowsy with the harmony...And plant in tyrant's mild humility" (4.3.341-5). However, Berowne also identifies the problem of theological and doctrinal conflict pitting the Old Testament against the New, the God of the Law against the God of Love. In words reminiscent of St Paul's appeal to a higher law in *Romans* 13: 8, Berowne proclaims: "Let us 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?" (4.3.358-61). The upshot of Berowne's Promethean Fire speech is that pleasure and love, the major themes of poetry, resolve conscience better than philosophical rationalism or dogmatic piety. Poetry is also, however, concerned with mercy and compassion, the proper characteristics of religion, at least when it is not distorted by dogmatic speculation. Shakespeare suggests that the reciprocity central to romantic love connects knowledge and self-knowledge, even as the social dimension of education lends itself more naturally to poetic representation than philosophic contemplation.

The Turn to Poetry

Navarre and his followers' courtship of the French ladies revolved around a series of poetic interludes that punctuate Act 5. There was, of course, a foreshadowing of this turn to poetry in Act 4. For example, the sonnet writing (and reading aloud) exercise of Navarre and his men was central to the unfolding of the discovery scene. When the men sought surreptitiously to woo they did so through verse, not by writing a systematic treatise on love. There was also the interception of Armado's letter to Jacquenetta, which was perhaps unintentionally poetic due to the malapropisms of the "fantastical" Spaniard who plays the unwitting jester to Navarre's court. Navarre, like his namesake Henry IV, courts France and marginalizes Spain. Another dramatic interlude in Act 4 involved the Princess and the deer hunt. On one hand, this scene is clearly a light hearted metaphor for Cupid's arrow striking the smitten King of Navarre. However, there is also a darker allusion to the slaughter of innocents in France's savage religious wars as the Princess confesses: "Glory grows guilty of detested crimes,/ When for fame's sake, for praise, an outward part,/ We bend to that the working of the heart;/ As I for praise alone now seek to spill/ The poor deer's blood, that my heart means no ill" (4.1.31-5). Darker, violent imagery is seldom far beneath the surface in *Love's Labour's Lost* as for example when we are reminded that even the delightful Cupid, image of love, was assassin to a sister of Katherine, the object of Dumaine's affection: "He made her melancholy, sad and heavy, so she died" (5.2.10).

In Act 5 theatrical and poetical representation is embedded into the courtship of the Navarese men and the French ladies. As we recall from Berowne's Promethean Fire speech, the play advances the idea that the romantic exchanges made possible by the dramatic devices of Act 5 are themselves the means to knowledge of being and of the self. The first dramatic intervention was the Muscovite performance. Boyet, the elderly lord attending on the French Princess, sets the scene by relaying the details of the plan that he has overheard. Disguised "like Muscovites or Russians" Navarre and his men will visit the Princess' *alfresco* court: "Their purpose is to parley, court, and dance,/ And everyone his love-feat will advance/ Unto his several mistresses, which they'll know/ By favors several which they did bestow" (5.2.121-5). In order to pursue their love interests, Navarre and his men have recourse to theatrical dramatization.

While the adoption of ridiculous foreign characters certainly adds to the comic value of the scene, the audience is left to wonder why the men do not court their ladies openly? In one sense, they are damned by their own dogmatic philosophic project. The royal edict is still in place, and thus they disguise themselves in order to conceal their hypocrisy. Navarre later admits his regret and indeed shame about his inhospitable conduct toward the Princess: “O you have liv’d in desolation here,/ Unseen, unvisited, much to our shame” (5.2.358). Alternatively, the Muscovite disguise is perhaps a ham-fisted test of the ladies’ virtue, or even a playful attempt to delight the ladies upon exposure later.

The Muscovite scene does not go as Navarre and his men had planned. The ladies forewarned, disguise themselves in order to give the men a taste of their own medicine. This leads to the second discovery scene, which returns to the theme of perjury, when the men discover that they have sworn oaths of undying love to the wrong women. The ladies decide to be uncooperative and downright standoffish about the whole affair as Rosaline recommends tormenting their hapless suitors: “Let us complain to what fools were here/ Disguis’d like Muscovites in shapeless gear” (5.2.302). The Muscovite scene also, however, reveals that Navarre and his men are the products of an imperfect education and have a defective view of poetry seeing it solely as instrumental to attaining their goal, namely possessing the beloved. Shakespeare suggests that the men are not yet aware of the possibility of genuine self-forgetting produced through open exchange and mutual respect.

This sense of the inadequacy of Navarre’s understanding of poetry is only heightened by his response to the second major poetic interlude in Act 5, the pageant of the Nine Worthies. The guiding spirit behind the Nine Worthies is a collection of secondary characters including Armado, his page Moth, Holofernes the scholar, the curate Nathaniel, the constable Dull and the clown Costard, who combine to produce a theatrical performance for the Princess. Under the leadership of Armado the troupe’s efforts are open, sincere and amateurish in the best (and original) sense of the word. When Navarre tries to cancel the performance pleading its low quality, the Princess demurs insisting: “That sport best pleaseth that doth least know how” (5.2.516). The idea behind the Nine Worthies familiar to Shakespeare’s contemporaries was edifying tales about great men of virtue; each of them heroes three of whom were traditionally from pagan antiquity, three from the Jewish Bible and three Christians.⁷ Several important points emerge from the performance of the Nine Worthies in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.

First, we only witness an incomplete collection of worthies. In this play within a play the action is interrupted and ultimately aborted after the appearance of only five of the heroes. Moreover, the traditional grouping of three in each set (classical, Jewish, Christian) is broken with four pagans Hector, Pompey, Alexander and Hercules, and only one Jewish champion Judas Maccabeus. Pompey and Hercules replace the more standard Caesar (Carroll 1976: 229). No Christian worthies appear perhaps again reflecting the shadow of religious war in Europe too divided over religious doctrine even to agree upon a list of Christian worthies. Second, the pageant presents an argument for the superiority of the active life over the contemplative life. The worthies signify a venerable view that practice of exemplary virtue in political life is the genuine source of eternal fame, rather than the cloistered and cultish existence of Navarre’s Academy. It is not surprising then that Navarre was so dismissive of the players: “I say they shall not come” (5.2.514). In contrast to Navarre’s pompous “book-men,” the pageant of worthies offers the “sweet war-man” Hector of whom Armado says, “when he breathed, he was a

man” (5.2.660). The cruel mockery of the players by Navarre and his men reveals once more the inadequacy of Navarre’s understanding of poetic education, which is meant to moderate cruel and vindictive passions. Indeed, Navarre and his men expose a profound disrespect for poetry and the principle of reciprocity central to the power of poetic arts. Holofernes, the scholar playing Judas Maccabeus, delivers perhaps the most moving line in the entire play when he responds to the taunting by Berowne and Dumaine: “This is not generous, not gentle, not humble” (5.2.628). The Navarese lords do not even seem to be aware of their own contradiction when they mock the very ideal of immortality in others that they themselves sought with the establishment of the Academy in the first place (Barton 1974: 176). Poetry demands self-reflection upon confrontation with representation of other selves.

While the turn to poetry in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is unmistakable, this play is not itself a traditional or standard comedy, which typically concludes with a spate of happy couples coupling. The Nine Worthies parallel Pyramus and Thisbe, the play within a play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.⁸ But whereas Pyramus and Thisbe was a mock tragedy of ill-starred love that indirectly reflected the nascent self-confidence of the Athenian *demos*, the Nine Worthies in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is suspended prior to completion due to two intrusions: reports of Jaquenetta’s pregnancy (and Armado’s demonstrably broken vow), and Marcade’s arrival with the news of the death of the French King. The spectre of death and the promise of new life combine to puncture fatally the dramatic illusion of the Nine Worthies’ pageant. Navarre’s courtship of the Princess fails, or at least is suspended, by this intrusion of mortality even as his insensitivity, or rather callousness, in the Princess’ moment of grief could not but bode ill for love-making: “Yet since love’s argument was first on foot,/ Let not the cloud of sorrow jostle it” (5.2.750). It is little surprise that the Princess rebuffs his entreaties with the argument that this is not the time “to make a world-without-end bargain” (5.2.788). Rather all of the men are prescribed by their lady loves a one year cooling off period in order to allow the French maidens to mourn their dead King. Navarre is condemned to a year in a “forlorn and naked hermitage” as a means to an “austere and insociable life” (5.2.795), while the sharp tongued Berowne is ordered by Rosaline to “seek the weary beds of sick people” in hospital as penance for his rudeness (5.2.820).

The characters in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* are peculiarly aware that they are part of an atypical comedy. Unsurprisingly, Berowne exemplifies this self-consciousness: “Our wooing doth end like an old play: Jack hath not Gill” (5.2.875). Indeed, he goes further to point to the structural limits of drama by insisting that a twelve month waiting period is “too long for a play” (5.2.877). Politics and filial piety obstruct erotic attachment, and we are reminded that mourning periods, like marriage ceremonies, are the purview of the churches. This is a hard lesson for Navarre and his men, but the conclusion of the play indicates that perhaps the romantic education of the Princess and her ladies is also incomplete. The assignment of mortifying missions to their admirers is probably not the best idea given that Navarre and his men (with the exception of Berowne) are already inclined toward morbid asceticism, and thus these assignments will possibly just intensify their worst traits. The sense that *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is a unique case among Shakespeare’s comedies, a comedy really only *in potentia*, is perhaps confirmed by the closing song, an appendix to the pageant of the Nine Worthies, performed by the Cuckoo and the Owl. These symbols of spring and winter, as well as youth and age, not to mention wisdom and marital infidelity, practically get the last word with a dialectical exchange that confirms the

incomplete or *aporetic* character of the play. This is arguably fitting for only a comedy that is truly aware of the limits of comedy can fully capture Shakespeare's comic spirit.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* shares much in common with Aristophanes' brutal satirizing of Socratic philosophy in *The Clouds*. The element that Shakespeare added to the Aristophanic comic mix is mockery of a sitting European monarch, not just ridiculing an eccentric busybody in the *agora*. Through the comedic action of the play, Shakespeare illustrates that the Platonic conception of a philosopher king in Christian Europe is an ideal prone to capture and manipulation by religious and theological extremists. Navarre's project to transcend religious sectarianism through philosophic rationalism was doomed from the start as philosophic reason is drawn to serve the cause of religious fanaticism precisely because of ascetic tendencies within Socratic philosophy itself. For Shakespeare the superiority of poetry over philosophy rests on the premise that pleasure and *eros* can transcend religious and ideological cleavages. *Love's Labour's Lost* demonstrates Shakespeare's conviction that his poetry has the power to bring together philosophy (Plato) and historical and religious context (Henry IV) in a manner that reflects universal principles of justice, moderation and reciprocity. A century before John Locke's *Letter on Toleration* (1689), Shakespeare adumbrated a vision of a post-sectarian, tolerant Europe assuming nascent form in the romantic education of the Huguenot King of Catholic France. The comic possibilities confronting Navarre in *Love's Labour's Lost* point to a spirit of accommodation that is natural to poetry, and thus makes possible what seems impossible in the rigid categories of dogmatic philosophy and theology.

Shakespeare's belief in the superiority of poetry over philosophy also entails a certain, albeit qualified, claim about the superiority of the active over the contemplative life. The worthies and great heroes of pagan antiquity, who represent one vision of the most admirable human beings, were not philosopher kings. But Shakespeare's rejection of philosopher kings does not in itself demonstrate that he believed that poetry simply can validate the goodness of political life. In the Myth of Er, Plato's spectacular poem about the afterlife that practically concludes the *Republic*, the soul of Odysseus (arguably the political man *par excellence*) chooses the quiet life of a private man as the most just life (Rep 620c). Shakespeare leaves us to wonder if at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost* the ruler of Navarre, in renouncing ascetic philosophy in favor of romantic love, has truly learned to accept the responsibilities of a just king.

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Endnotes

¹ Pangle argues convincingly that Shakespeare's contemporary Cervantes also exhibited deep concerns about the "militant tendencies" in modern religion in *Don Quixote* (2013: 390).

² Plato 2004: 473c8-d5. Hereafter in notes and text Rep and stephanus number.

³ Hibbard (1990: 22-23) also sees the parallel between Navarre and Plato's philosopher kings. I agree with Craig that Shakespeare considered "Plato's texts and problems," especially "the relation between philosophy and political power" (2001: 251), but I reach a very different conclusion from Craig with respect to Shakespeare's position in the quarrel between philosophy and poetry.

⁴ For good biographies of Henry IV, see Love 2001, Buisseret 1984, and Seward 1971.

⁵ All quotations from *Love's Labour's Lost* are from Shakespeare 1974. The Princess' call is from Act 5, scene 2, line 87. Hereafter in note and text simply act, scene and line number.

⁶ Here is a wonderful example of how religious sectarianism could confound natural *eros* in the 16th century taken from the memoirs of Margaret Valois, actual Catholic wife of Henry IV: "The king my husband being followed by a handsome troupe of lords and gentlemen, as honorable as the finest gallants I've ever seen at court; and there was nothing less than admirable about them, *except that they were Huguenots*" (Londré 1997: 328, emphasis added).

⁷ For a fuller discussion of the idea behind the concept of the Nine Worthies, see Carroll 1976: 229-35.

⁸ For a good discussion of the poetic power and political meaning of the Pyramus and Thisbe performance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, see Blits 2003: 174-92.