

SCENES FROM
SHAKESPEARE

HARRY LEVIN

EDITED BY GWYNNE B. EVANS

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PREPARATORY NOTE

The late Professor Harry Levin, my good friend and colleague, with whom I had the special privilege of teaching Shakespeare over many years, was internationally recognized as a major critical voice. As a *comparatiste*, his studies embraced a wide range — classical, English and European, and American — but among his other books the two devoted to Shakespeare have been particularly influential, *The Question of Hamlet* (1959) and *Shakespeare and the Revolution of the Times* (1976), while references to Shakespeare abound in most of his other work, even in *Memories of the Moderns* (1980).

The seven essays here collected, although each is complete in itself, were thought of by Professor Levin as parts of a larger study, in which he planned to examine, through carefully chosen examples, the central animating and focusing action of what French critics have termed the *scène à faire*, that Professor Levin, in his review of James E. Hirsh's *The Structure of Shakespearean Scenes* (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, 34 (1983), 487), defines as "the segment of the original story that cries out to be dramatized, that stimulates the talents of the dramatist, that provides the actors with their best opportunities. In short, it is the scene that makes the play." These essays will, I am sure, reward a reader with as much pleasure as Professor Levin so clearly found in writing them. As Goethe says: "Man lernt nichts kennen als was man liebt."

Gwynne B. Evans, Harvard University

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"Sitting in the Sky (*Love's Labor's Lost*, IV, iii)," *Shakespeare's 'Rough Magic': Renaissance Essays in Honor of C.L. Barber*, ed. Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985): 113 - 30.

"A Garden in Belmont (*The Merchant of Venice*, V, i)," *Shakespeare and Dramatic Tradition: Essays in Honor of S.F. Johnson*, ed. W.R. Elton and William B. Long (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989): 13 - 31.

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"Sitting upon the Ground (*Richard II*, iv, i)," *Shakespeare's Universe: Renaissance Ideas and Conventions: Essays in Honor of W.R. Elton*, ed. John M. Mucciolo et al. (Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1996): 3-20.

"The Heights and the Depths (A Scene from *King Lear*)," *More Talking of Shakespeare*, ed. John Garrett (London: Longmans, 1959): 87-103.

"Two Scenes from *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare's Craft: Eight Lectures*, ed. Philip H. Highfill, Jr. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982): 48-68.

"Two Monumental Death-Scenes (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, XV; V, ii)," *Shakespeare: Text, Language, Criticism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Spevack*, ed. Bernhard Fabian and Kurt Terzeli von Rosadov (Hildesheim: Olms - Weidmann, 1987): 147-63.

"The Scenic Method," Review of James E. Hirsh, *The Structure of Shakespearean Scenes* (Yale, 1983), *Shakespeare Quarterly* 34, no. 4, (1983): 486-88.

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SCENES FROM SHAKESPEARE

COMEDIES

Sitting in the Sky

(*Love's Labor's Lost*, IV, iii)

All's Well That Ends Well, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Comedy of Errors* — such phrases are generic as well as proverbial, and might be applied to almost any of Shakespeare's comedies. He was even more off-hand about specifying his subject matter when he entitled one play *As You Like It* and subtitled another *What You Will*. Hence *Love's Labor's Lost* is an exceptional title for its genre, alerting us to expect the unexpected. *Love's Labor's Won* sounds much more conformable, and has also been given a contemporary listing; but it is now a ghost, unless it has managed to survive under some alternate name. Courtship is invariably a feature, usually the most central one, in Shakespearean comedy. The standard happy ending, in the prospect of marriage, has traditional roots that reach as deeply into the soil as the hymeneal *Kōmos* of Aristophanes. Though *Love's Labor's Lost* comprises "a series of wooing games," as C.L. Barber has emphasized, these uncharacteristically lead to no festive consummation.¹ When Don Armado writes in his altisonant manner, "The catastrophe is a nuptial" (4.1.76), he is merely utilizing the terminology of rhetoric to inform the simple-minded Jacquenetta that their betrothal will be a *dénouement*.² For the others the outcome will be catastrophic in a more modem, less rhetorical sense.

Yet their interchanges are colored throughout by tropes of gamesmanship: of cards, of dice, of riddles, of children's pastimes, of tennis and other sports. Metaphor is condensed into a pun on "shooter/suitor" (4.1.108, 112), and the hunt is acted out by female archers. Dialogue becomes choreographic in more ways than one, as when Berowne meet Katherine (it is Rosaline in the Folio). His introductory question, "Did I not dance with you in Brabant once?," is bandied back by

her mocking repetition, and they are off apace on a bantering *pas de deux*, step by step, line by line, tit for tat (2.1.114-27). The page Moth, the youngest and worldliest of the males, advises his master Armado to win his love "with a French brawl" (3.1.8-9). This would have been a swaying kind of dance, the *branle*, but it might incidentally recall the play's historical precedent: a French princess, accompanied by a "flying squadron" of ladies-in-waiting, visiting a king of Navarre (actually her estranged husband) to regain her father's dower-rights to the Province of Aquitaine. The atmosphere has likewise been compared with that of a royal English progress. The situation, however, scarcely allows for much of the ceremonious hospitality by which Queen Elizabeth was so elaborately welcomed, when she travelled as the guest of her richest nobles to such estates as Kenilworth and Elvetham.

Shakespeare has complicated the visitation by turning the court into an academy. Here his framework must have been reinforced by *Tile French Academy* translated from Pierre de La Primaudaye, a popular compendium of received wisdom, religious, ethical, and scientific. Its mode of discourse was that of a study-circle where four young noblemen engage in dialogues, interrupted for a spell by France's civil wars. Shakespeare's dramatic conflict, the usual battle of the sexes, has been sublimated into a "civil war of wits" (2.1.226), wherein the tag-lines of repartee, stichomythy, and badinage are allotted to the female interlocutors. The paradigm for wooing is naturally a pursuit, headed toward a mutually agreeable capitulation. In this peculiar case, it is preceded and succeeded by a withdrawal, thereby reversing the classic cycle of banishment and homecoming. Ferdinand, the King of Navarre, begins — as if he were beginning a sonnet sequence — by abjuring worldliness in favor of immortality and proclaiming a quasi-monastic retreat along with three of his courtiers:

Our court shall be a little academe,
Still and contemplative in living art. (1.1.13-14)

The *ars vivendi* is envisaged, under conditions more suggestive of medieval asceticism than of Renaissance humanism, as a *vita contemplativa*. Berowne has his misgivings from the outset, realistically grounded upon the constriction of the three-vear statutes: "Not to see ladies, study, fast, not sleep" (48). He demonstrates, by etymological

wordplay, that "study" can mean desire more positively than abstinence. But he rounds out his flight of paradoxes by signing the oath, and earns the King's accolade for his intellectual cultivation: "How well he's read, to reason against reading" (94).

In spelling out that educational covenant, it should be remarked, the emphasis falls upon its regimen and not upon its curriculum. There is much talk about books, perhaps more than elsewhere in Shakespeare, but the documents that come up for direct perusal or critical discussion will be nothing but love letters or poetical screeds. In the age of Galileo, Shakespeare's exact contemporary, astronomy would presumably claim the attention of aspiring scholars. Berowne's anti-intellectual argument is that one may take pleasure in the stars without naming them. The only practical exercise in this science comes when Costard, the clown, propounds a mouldy riddle about the moon, and his two "book-men" — Holofernes and Sir Nathaniel — vary the obvious answer with classical eponyms: "Dictynna," "Phoebe," "Luna" (4.2.34, 36-38). Indeed it has been Costard who discredited the academic program, just as soon as it was enunciated, by being taken with Jacquenetta, arrested by the constable Dull, and informed upon by his verbose rival, Armado. Costard, who possesses his own vein of nimble verbiage, slips from one indictment to another by transposing synonyms: "wench," "damsel," "virgin," "maid" (1.1.283-99). The implication is to forewarn us, before we have met the great ladies, that they are her sisters under the skin.

"In Shakespear's plays" — the spelling evinces Bernard Shaw — "the women always take the initiative."³ Shaw was seeking warrant for his updated version of the Don Juan legend, surely an a fortiori example of the Shakes-Shavian heroine as "pursuer and contriver" and the runaway hero as "pursued and disposed of." In *Man and Superman* the Übermensch has to be Woman, the matrix of the Life-Force, instinctively closer to nature and consequently farther away from men's follies. The formula is well exemplified within the Shakespearean repertory, and nowhere more aptly than in *Love's Labor's Lost*. The diplomatic mission of the Princess and her entourage, as it chances, is timed to coincide with the retirement of the King and his "book-mates" (4.1.100). To their brief experiment in plain living and high thinking, this is an inevitable challenge, exacerbated by the grim proviso that no lady may venture within the verge "on pain of losing her tongue" (1.1.123-24). Thus the starting-point is an uneasy compromise. The delegation must be somehow

or other dealt with, though not admitted to the cloistered reading-rooms of the chateau, but encamped in the outdoor climate of the park where they freely exercise. According to Bovet, their courtly escort, it is a state of siege (2.1.86). It is clearly not a coeducational Abbey of Thélème.

If the plot is somewhat episodic, symmetry is imposed by the *dramatis personae*. Shakespeare's fondness for reduplicating his romantic couples surpasses itself, since both the King and the Princess have a trio of followers, and everyone is respectively interested in his or her opposite number. The fifth flirtation is the first to surface: Armado, a corresponding member of the Academy and its link with the underplot, will outrival Costard for Jacquenetta's favors. Their companions on the lower plane, the schoolmaster Holofernes and the curate Sir Nathaniel, will be introduced late and chiefly employed to provide the concluding entertainment. But their choric presence fills an important gap. The King and his colleagues, despite their declared intentions, have no real opportunities to digest or disseminate book-learning. Nathaniel is the sort of insipid stooge to Holofernes that justice Silence would be to justice Shallow, and they are the ones who have "eat paper" and "drunk ink" (4.2.25-26). There survives a well attested tradition that Shakespeare himself had once taught school in the country; there may be sardonic reminiscence when Dr. Pinch makes his intrusion into *The Comedy of Errors*. Someone must speak for the inkhorn, voicing syntactic and orthographical crotchets, misapplying Ovid, Mantuan, and Priscian, and subjecting Berowne's luckless sonnet to exegetical mayhem.

Accordingly, the pedagogue most fully represents the scholastic viewpoint, its total immersion in bookishness to the exclusion of experience, its susceptibility to Bacon's "first distemper of Learning": the failure to distinguish words from matter.⁴ Significantly the original texts sometimes refer to Holofernes as "the Pedant," even as they do to Armado as "Braggart," relating them explicitly to the stylized characters of the *Commedia dell' Arte*. To juxtapose them with the witty lovers is to contrast the *Comedy of Humors* with the *Comedy of Manners*, to conceive them as more typically in the Jonsonian than in the Shakespearean mode. Affectation — Fielding's perpetual source of "the true Ridiculous" — is pervasive at both levels, each of which has been angled to reflect upon the other, though in a contrasting light.⁵ Addison has clarifyingly written:

A man who has been brought up among Books, and is able to talk of nothing else, is a very indifferent Companion, and what we call a Pedant. But, methinks, we should enlarge the Title, and give it every one that does not know how to think out of his Profession and particular way of Life.⁶

This is to broaden the concept of pedantry into professional deformation, a habitual stimulus toward comic characterization. But the underlying circumstance remains that academism itself has effectively furnished a persistent premise for comedy, in that it has prompted playwrights to expose the disparities between an accepted set of rules and routines, on the one hand, and the perception of more flexible realities on the other. Hence the recurrent notion of a school, in the very flouting of whose derisory lessons there is something solid to be learned: *The School for Scandal*, *L'Ecole des femmes* (or *des maris*), the Frontisterion (or think-tank) of Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

The wide spread of conjectured dates for the composition of *Love's Labor's Lost* hints that it might have bordered upon a school-exercise in itself, for an apprentice playwright on his progression through journey-work to mastery. Passages in rambling or galloping couplets redolent of *Cambyses*, *Ralph Roister Doister* or *Damon and Pithias*, together with certain characteristics of the boy-actors' theater, suggested — to Alfred Harbage — survivals from Shakespeare's earliest novitiate.⁷ The counterargument is that the predominating tone seems highly sophisticated, and that he would not find it hard to echo the archaic while he was deliberately presenting a gallimaufry of styles. Writers usually start with imitation, from which they frequently liberate themselves through parody. Maturing at the florescence of the English language, Shakespeare could not have but been style-conscious. His early work is heavily loaded with classical allusions and rhetorical figures; it resonates with verse that out-Marlowes Marlowe and prose that gilds Lyly. Not long afterward, with the *Sonnets* and the two epyllia, he plunged into the even more bookish sphere of erotic poetry. He seems to have achieved a voice of his own in the mid-nineties, his "lyrical period," to which *Love's Labor's Lost* is commonly viewed as a prologue — with the assumption that it may have been later revised and further elaborated for private performance.

Generally speaking, from those times until ours, the play has put off

actors and been put down by critics. Anne Barton may afford some explanation by calling it "perhaps the most relentlessly Elizabethan of Shakespeare's plays."⁸ Granville-Barker, reviving the interest of the twentieth century in it, had conceded that "Here is a fashionable play; now, by three hundred years, out of fashion."⁹ This has meant that the significance of occasional lines is probably lost forever, yet cruces can be pruned away by cuts. When we are deterred, it is less by the word-games ("a curious foppery of language" which Walter Pater could go along with) than by the in-jokes, many of which have been out too long.¹⁰ Brains have been cudgelled to identify topical references; but the evidence has been slight and strained; and scholiasts have seldom agreed upon their identifications. Meanwhile successful revivals, both on the stage and among the critics, have attested an esthetic charm and a satirical thrust which have not proved so ephemeral after all. The Quarto had announced "A Pleasant Conceited Comedie." *Romeo and Juliet* was also termed "conceited" on the title page of its Second Quarto, and the Elizabethans valued a "conceit" as a peculiar grace involving both wit and fancy. By a latter day reckoning, the pioneering study of O.J. Campbell, *Love's Labor's Lost* might be "regarded as Shakespeare's *Précieuses Ridicules*."¹¹

But the difference is more striking than the resemblance. Molière's suitors are rejected from a *salon* because they are insufficiently sensitive to their ladies' preciousness. They revenge themselves by the practical joke of getting their *valets* admitted in the roles of pretended *précieux*. With Shakespeare it is the men who are affected, as it were, and by self-contradictory quirks. Two parallel monologues, Armado's at the end of the First Act and Berowne's at the end of the Third, herald the retreat from their initial retreat. Armado speaks in burlesque prose, and consoles himself by evoking prototypes — ancient heroes in love, such as Sampson and Hercules, of whose cases Moth has just reminded him. Though he defies Cupid in duelling jargon, the *miles gloriosus* is rapidly turning into a man of letters. A "congruent epitheton" is his *mot juste* (1. 2.14).

Adieu, valor, rust, rapier, be still, drum, for your manager is in love;
vea, he loveth. Assist me, some extemporal god of rhyme, for I am sure
I shall turn sonnet. Devise, wit, write, pen, for I am for whole volumes
in folio. (1.2.181-85)

Berowne speaks in blank verse, albeit less romantically. He is essentially

a plain-speaker; and, though he rises to verbalistic occasions with the utmost virtuosity, his commitment is never wholly serious. He is cast as "the merry madcap lord. Not a word with him but a jest" (2.1.215-16). Like his successor, Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing*, he has challenged destiny by assuming a misogynistic stance. Berowne's tirade is addressed to three targets. Centrally there is Cupid, whose neglected powers are both belittled and glorified with pungent epithets. Then there is Rosaline, prefiguring not only Orlando's Rosalind but more literally Romeo's first beloved, whom the latter will all too quickly forget. If Berowne's Rosaline is envisioned as a Dark Lady of the Sonnets, the likeness is more pejorative than Petrarchan. The "two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes" (3.1.197) merely fill in the details of "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (130). First and last, subsuming everything else in a humorous outlook, he is angry with himself. It lends an added touch of male chauvinism that, just as Armado mused about King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid, so Berowne views his infatuation with Rosaline as a social misalliance:

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 sign, pray, sue, groan:
 Some men must love my lady, and some Joan. (3.1.200-205)

The underplot crisscrosses the main plot during the first two scenes of the Fourth Act, when Costard misdelivers Armado's letter to Rosaline and Berowne's sonnet to Jacquenetta. That intercepted "canzonet" would appropriately reappear in the rather conventional Elizabethan miscellany, *The Passionate Pilgrim*, and it gives us no grounds for refuting Holofernes' Latin dismissal: "*Imitari* is nothing" (4.2.120, 125-26). Yet it opens by sounding the keynote of the play, with one of the twenty-two iterations of the keyword *forswear*: "If love make me foresworn, how shall I swear to love?" (105). And it will carry on the metaphorical *Leitmotiv*, in one of its alexandrines: "Study his bias leaves, and makes his books thine eyes" (109). Since we have now heard this specimen of his groaning rhymes, there is no need for Berowne to read aloud his second sonnet when he makes his entrance in the next scene alone, still denouncing himself and praising Rosaline's eyes in prose. Nor is there, as

it briskly happens, time. Having broken his own vow, he "would not care a pin, if the other three were in" (4.3.18). And they are not out afield hunting deer, as he has assumed. He is interrupted by the King's stealthy entrance, and must even more stealthily settle himself into an observant hiding place. Most editors direct him to climb up a tree, inasmuch as both he and the King will subsequently allude to his elevated coign of vantage.

The King has brought along a paper too, and — with Berowne as his invisible spectator and critic — he proceeds to declaim what could have been a sonnet, if he had not added a supererogatory couplet. That it was not anthologized, like the other three love-poems, confirms an impression that it is the weakest of the four. Its solar imagery reads like a parody of Sonnet 33 ("Full many a glorious morning I have seen . . ."), and it will earn the sarcasm of Berowne with its metaphysical conceit of the lover's teardrops being transposed into coaches that convey his mistress to her triumphs (33-34; 153-54). Before the King can drop this vulnerable missive where the Princess might pick it up, Longaville comes in with one of his own — composed, as it transpires, with stubborn effort and without much confidence. The King must therefore hide and, in his turn, comment antiphonally on Longaville's plaints. The latter's sonnet, which would be included in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, addresses itself to the issue at hand as Berowne's had done: the making and breaking of vows. Longaville's images similarly modulate from the literary to the ocular, when he belauds "the heavenly rhetoric" of Maria's eye (4.3.58). The quartet is expectably completed when Dumaine enters, causing Longaville to seek private shelter, where he has his sole chance to eavesdrop, unaware that he himself has been doubly eavesdropped upon.

Poor Dumaine! He is the only member of the quaternion who will not have the immediate consolation of witnessing another in his plight. His lucubration is not strictly a sonnet; it is more like the songs from the plays, and not unlike the many other lyrics of the period celebrating the month of May; and its reprinting, not only in *The Passionate Pilgrim* but in the much choicer *England's Helicon* (where "the lover" becomes a shepherd), documents its popularity and justifies its culminating place. The reprinted versions drop the distich that connects it with the action:

Do not call it sin in me
That I am forsworn for thee. (113-14)

Dumaine ironically longs for the amnesty that might be granted to him if the others were proved to be companions in perjury: "O would the King, Berowne, and Longaville / Were lovers too!" (121-22). He will have his wish soon enough. Meanwhile, while he is mooning over his Katherine, Longaville is vocally and critically aware of his tergiversation, the King is aware of Longaville's as well as of Dumaine's, and Berowne is aware of all three. From his upmost perch he looks down upon them, as if it were the turning-point in a game of hide-and-seek, and as if he were omniscient and beyond reproach:

"All hid, all hid," an old infant play.
Like a demigod here sit I in the sky,
And wretched fools' secrets heedfullv o'er-eve. (76-78)

Longaville over-eyes one fool's secret, the King two, and Berowne three. Each of them is additionally conscious of his own folly, but blithely unconscious of having been observed in it, whereas we — the audience — are sitting upon an Olympian eminence, whence the whole sequence of four foolish secrets will fit into an ultimate fifth perspective.

Bertrand Evans, in his intensive structural study of *Shakespeare's Comedies*, bases his analyses on a principle of "discrepant awareness."¹² This would constitute the very basis of dramatic irony, where we play blindman's bluff until disclosures of full knowledge throw a final light on tragic flaws or comic errors. Professor Evans tells us that *Love's Labor's Lost* relies less on the exploitation of that device than we might have expected, and yet the sonnet-reading scene must be its *tour de force*. Eavesdropping is brought about by conspiracy in *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Troilus and Cressida*, not to mention *Hamlet* or *Othello*. Herein it is accidental, or otherwise the contrivance of the dramatist. Shaw, in his first Shakespearean review, called it "the only absolutely impossible situation" within the comedy.¹³ As an early apostle of naturalistic drama, though he would move on toward, his own stylizations, he particularly balked at the convention of the aside — that brief speech which, like the longer soliloquy, was presumed to be the unvoiced thought of the speaker. We may assume that each of these successive speakers, on making his appearance, thinks out loud *viva voce*. Each of the hiding listeners, overhearing him, is supposed to express a reaction *aside*. But it would seem that, through some extension of poetic