

I. A GENERAL VIEW OF THE MAIN THEMES

Introduction

Among the 37 plays of the Shakespearian canon, only four of them have an original plot, invented by the author, all of them comedies: *Love's Labours Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Tempest*. As regards *Love's Labours Lost*¹ some commentators and editors of the text have been however busy seeking for sources, and they have found some clues, especially concerning the historical context, but most of them have no real relevance to the literary substance of the play. A few of them have assumed the existence of a specific source, that is to say a model, even a previous version of the same story, either narrative or dramatic, but nothing of this sort has been found so far and probably will never be. Among others Francis Douce (1757-1834) an antiquarian who in 1807 published a book called *Illustrations of Shakespeare and Ancient Manners* conjectured that the idea of the play was taken from an unnamed French novel of the fifteenth century, but that was mere guesswork. In their Cambridge edition, John Dover Wilson and Arthur Quiller-Couch, who were baffled by this play, regarded it as essentially *topical*, that is to say entirely made of allusions to contemporary events and persons, a sort of transposition on the stage of what is called in French a *roman à clés*,² with all kinds of private jokes difficult to understand nowadays, as only

-
1. There are two alternative spellings of the title, as indicated in the *Avant-propos* in French. The more frequent title, meaning: "love's labour *is* lost", is printed on the cover of this book, as a concession to tradition, but the more authentic and significant one, with *labours* as a noun in the plural, is used all through the text.
 2. The French phrase is sometimes used in English texts, with this spelling: *roman à clef*, the word *clef* remaining in the singular.

a small set of people were admitted to the coterie concerned by it. Failing to grasp its unity and artistic purpose, these two specialists explained it away as being just an ephemeral production, not destined to survive its local and contemporary purpose. They were also interested in the search for sources, and supposed that they could be found in the immediate context of the time, including the literary fashions that were imitated or parodied. Of course no literary production can be created completely *ex nihilo*, inevitably it contains elements taken from exterior events and others inspired by what the author has read or heard from other authors, but circumstantial reminiscences, either coming from history or literature, do not constitute a whole, and could not give birth to the general idea and movement of the play. It is for instance ascertained that the king of Navarre received embassies from France and that he organized entertainments for them. That was a very ordinary event everywhere in Europe, it may have provided Shakespeare with some basic material, but does not explain the artistic process of creation or the general significance of the play. It seems reasonable to infer that the play is original in both senses of the word: original because Shakespeare is the first and sole author of it, and also because the story and its treatment by the dramatist have seemed to a vast majority of readers and for a very long time so baffling and so much out of the way that it was regarded as a vagary, a literary freak, an unidentified flying object, which indeed did fly far above many people's heads. Though there is no supernatural event taking place in it the play seems to belong to the realm of fantasy, yet of a kind not meant for the naïve part of the potential public, but for the most learned people, the highbrows, though they are made fun of all through. It is indeed an unusual work, an artificial play that ridicules artificiality, a sophisticated text which contains a consistent onslaught on sophistication, a pedantic comedy making fun of pedants. Its author cultivates the self-conscious device sometimes called *mise en abyme*—the French phrase, introduced by André Gide, can be used in an English text—but another term meets the same purpose, *metadrama*, when the theatre contains, in various ways, considerations upon itself.

The ideas put forward in the above paragraph invite the reader to take a general survey of the play, a synthetic view, in order to consider it as an organic whole. This effort is indeed necessary, especially as this comedy has

too often been regarded as a rambling hotchpotch, but an analytic approach is equally important. Yet the analysis proposed hereafter does not consist in just describing the dramatic events taking place on the stage, together with their causes and their consequences—this superficial knowledge can be obtained by an attentive reading of the text—but it concerns the themes of general interest that are interwoven in it. Particular attention must be focused on the form, since the play has the reputation of being a feast of language—this phrase being taken from the text itself (5.1.33), but some important themes, recurrent in Shakespeare's works, show through with an implicit seriousness that gives the lie to the reputation of the play as a merely gamesome and frivolous entertainment.

Language as a thematic component

The emphasis laid on language does not only concern the readers, spectators and commentators of the play, who respond to it in various ways, favourably or not. The characters on the stage are keenly interested in it too, even Costard who commits lexical blunders and yet naively endeavours to increase his vocabulary. Some of them have a professional turn of mind as users of language, they are, like Shakespeare himself, word-conscious. No other play contains so many technicalities belonging to what Roman Jakobson called the *metalingual* or *metalinguistic* function of language, when language refers to itself. To take the simplest of all examples, the word *word* recurs 45 times in the play. Grammatical terms, and indeed all the paraphernalia of linguistic terminology belong to this function, but there is also a psychological aspect to it. Most people speak their own native idiom spontaneously, without bothering about the rules of grammar, the origin of words, the ambiguity of many of them, the homophonies that make puns possible, whereas other people, essentially scholars and authors, are versed in these matters, sometimes imbued and obsessed by them, to such an extent that they often lose contact with their fellow-beings. Not only do they make a point of using rare words that their interlocutors or readers may be ignorant of, but they disdain to use language as a plain means of communication. Shakespeare practised that function of language as much as James Joyce himself, but in *Love's Labours Lost* he both wallowed in it and could deride the linguistic

craze as if from the outside. Since literature and particularly poetry use language as their raw material, besides having to obey rules, the people who dabble in these activities also require a professional knowhow of technique. But they can make themselves ridiculous, either by a punctilious excess of technicality or by a lack of it. These two opposite facets of the theme are exploited as comic mainsprings in the play, but the author's enjoyment of his own mastery in this field can also be felt. The pedantic remarks of Holofernes, the caricatural schoolmaster, on the art of verse, are characteristic of his crankiness, but they obliquely inform us about the interest that Shakespeare himself inevitably took in these matters. In imitation of Jakobson's formula, *Love's Labours Lost* could be called a metaliterary or metadramatic play. The text also contains terms belonging to the vocabulary of grammar, lexicology, stylistics and metrics, such as *word(s)*, *conceits*, *comparisons*, *hyperboles*, *bombast*, *rhetoric*, *style*, *terms*, *phrases*, *verse*, *rhyme*, *sonneting*, *accent*, *apostrophe*, *epithet*, *poesy*, *meaning*.

The derision of learning

A satirical and even farcical view of learning, science, philosophy, is not unusual in the sixteenth century. Though the old doctrines gathered under the heading of scholasticism¹ had progressively given place to the new methods in the wake of Renaissance humanism, scholars served as targets for satire. Moreover as one of the consequences of the progress of education, especially in England, schoolteachers themselves were ridiculed for their professional eccentricities. Rabelais is well-known for his ruthless onslaughts on university doctors, and he also mocked the more humble members of the teaching profession, such as his own Holoferne, Gargantua's first tutor, who still practised the old scholastic conceptions. Most probably Shakespeare's Holofernes was inspired by that grotesque character.

1. The word *scholastic* and all its cognates, supposed with all their disparaging connotations to designate medieval philosophy and theology, were coined in the sixteenth century, but they began to be commonly used in the seventeenth century.

The subjects that the would-be academics intend to study seem to comprehend an encyclopaedic range, but some stress is laid on philosophy. What does this notion refer to? There are in Shakespeare's works fourteen occurrences of the word *philosophy* and twelve of *philosopher*. Most often—except in *Timon of Athens* where the self-proclaimed philosopher Apemantus belongs to the cynic school—the notion of philosophy is associated in Shakespeare with ethical doctrines, especially stoicism, preaching patience, serenity, resignation, acceptance of things as they are, and dignity in every circumstance, including the most painful. Stoicism had remained an asset all through the Middle Ages as an inheritance from Antiquity, as it had been adopted by Christianity. The Christian martyr Boethius (c.473-525) was famous for having, while awaiting his execution, written in prison a treatise inspired by Seneca and referring to his own situation, called *De consolazione philosophiae*. This book was still popular during the Renaissance period, often translated into English, including by Queen Elizabeth herself. Yet philosophers of the stoic school were often accused of duplicity, of not living up to their own tenets, especially disinterestedness and equanimity, when confronted to real perils and calamities. Thus hypocrisy often figures among the faults for which philosophers—one would say intellectuals nowadays—are blamed. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, to his brother Antonio who gives him a lesson of patience for the supposed death of his daughter, Leonato answers:

I pray thee, peace. I will be flesh and blood;
 For there was never yet philosopher
 That could endure the toothache patiently,
 However they have writ the style of gods
 And made a push at chance and sufferance. (5.1.34-8)

The King of Navarre does not give precise details about the type of philosophy that he intends to learn in his academy, but as the whole enterprise looks farcical from the beginning, though expressed in a solemn style but vibrating with ironical resonances, one cannot define it with accuracy. When Dumaine says

To love, to wealth, to pomp, I pine and die,
 With all these living in philosophy. (1.1.31-2)

he seems to regard philosophy as a way of life, not only an intellectual acquisition, or maybe he means that he will live with his companions in the study of philosophy, this word having a sort of general meaning, including all kinds of subjects. The exacting discipline that the members of the Academe impose upon themselves is supposed to bring them both wisdom and knowledge. It soon appears clearly enough that wisdom and knowledge are not necessarily compatible with each other. Neither of them are innate, but wisdom is a moral quality, resulting from a mixture of good sense, experience and virtue, whereas knowledge is an intellectual asset painstakingly acquired, at the cost of such great fatigue of the brain that it may result in sheer madness. This is at least a popular view of the matter, usually treated with contempt by learned scholars and scientists.

The moral aspect of the discipline—a word which can be taken in all its acceptations—is not omitted, since the apprentices in learning are supposed to submit themselves to strict rules of behaviour. This is the unexpected aspect of the situation. Though no mention is made of a religious vocation, the King associates the course of studies with monastic confinement. Yet mortification of the flesh, asceticism, solitude, were supposed to lead to spiritual ecstasy rather than intellectual enlightenment. The company of women was prohibited for the same reason. The similitude between monastic meditation and devotion to studies is carried on in the first scene of the play with comic exaggeration. Aristotle's Academy did not prefigure medieval monasteries. The Athenian philosopher and his disciples did not live in confinement; they debated in the open air, sometimes walking along the streets or the near countryside. This is why they were called sometimes the philosophers belonging to the *peripatetic*, that is to say the strolling school.

The Academy instituted by the King of Navarre is the exact contrary of Rabelais' *Abbaye de Thélème*. In a certain way Shakespeare reaches the same aim as the author of *Gargantua*, in making fun of monastic ideals. But these ideals, obsolete in Tudor England after the abolition of monasteries by Henry VIII in 1538, are replaced in the play by another type of ideals, also made fun of for similar reasons. The idea that scholars, bookworms, scientists, lose touch with reality is as old as the hills and was treated with harshness by Aristophanes in *The Clouds*. La Fontaine's fable of the astronomer falling into a well comes from Aesopus. The story of scientists, or would-be scientists living in studious seclusion, then freed

from their austere addiction by the intrusion of the feminine element has not inspired many dramatists or novelists, but has given birth to a great number of films, especially in Hollywood, for instance *Ball of Fire*, directed by Howard Hawks in 1941, from a screenplay written by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, with Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck in the main parts. But whereas the girl who in the film succeeds in unfreezing the single-minded scientists is really the ball of fire announced by the title, a bouncing night-club entertainer, the female characters in *Love's Labours Lost* are more soberly dignified than the men, showing that Shakespeare treats the topic with more subtlety than his successors.

Shakespeare's derision of learning might be attributed to the fact that he had no university training, and perhaps kept in his psyche some sort of regret, or bore a grudge towards his impoverished father, who had not sent such a gifted boy to Oxford or Cambridge, or envied his brothers-in-trade such as Marlowe or Jonson who belonged to the group of the "University Wits", as they were named by George Saintsbury in the nineteenth century. But this biographical approach to the text would appear meanly reductive and unfair both to the author and to the text. A better explanation refers to Shakespeare's sense of humour and knowledge of the world. It is natural for an author of comedies meant for laughter and entertainment to choose serious matters, such as learning, and love too, as butts for derision. But the whole may be more serious and satirical than it seems. Not just for fun does Shakespeare aim at intellectual vagaries. Tragedies are supposed to pinpoint the dangers of *hubris*, that is to say pride, presumption, megalomania. But milder forms of hubris may provide targets for comedies. Learned people often have a tendency to regard themselves as superior to the common run of mankind, to invent or believe in doctrines supposed to give a key to all the mysteries of nature, society, psychology and so on.

When Hamlet says to his fellow student Horatio:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your¹ philosophy. (1.5.166-7)

1. The possessive *your* in this case does not refer to Horatio, Hamlet's interlocutor, but represents a sort of article endowed with disparaging connotations. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word *your* in this kind of context is "Used with no definite meaning, or vaguely implying 'that you know of' [...]: often expressing contempt."

he sums up the popular views about philosophers, or intellectuals in general. They are labelled as dreamers who have lost touch both with heaven and earth: their quest of rationality has estranged them from the revelations of religious faith, while their belief in abstract systems makes them impractical in everyday-life and half blind to material realities about them. They worship reason but they build up theories which may seem devoid of common sense, according to Berowne, when he says that his companions are in quest of

Things hid and barred, you mean, from common sense?
(1.1.57)

Now, can reason be divorced from common sense?

It happens that scholars have taken revenge on Shakespeare for his aspersions. They now live on him. Could he imagine that several centuries after his death his own works, including *Love's Labours Lost*, would be learnedly studied in universities and figure in syllabuses for competitive examinations, that innumerable articles and books would be written everywhere in the world about them by presumptuous dreamers and finicky hair-splitters? And that among these illuminati there would be as many women as men? And that a fellow poet of the name of Coleridge, who also taught philosophy, would call him "the most philosophic of poets"?

Sophistry and casuistry

The satire on official philosophy and theology includes a denunciation of casuistry. Lawyers and theologians were often accused of having been taught the technique of dialectic jugglery enabling them to prove any assertion as well as its opposite. A passage in *Macbeth* (the Porter scene), shows that Shakespeare shared the common conviction that Jesuits were experts in the practice of equivocation, the art of producing speeches capable of containing two opposite meanings at the same time, thence allowing the members of that brotherhood to plead that they were victims of a misunderstanding when accused of having said something subversive or treacherous. But the central meaning of casuistry lies in the recourse to the notion of *cases*, and is concerned with matters of conscience. Every one is bound by principles, duties, oaths, but there are imperative cases in life in which a person may