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► **To cite this version:**

Christine Sukic. ‘I am sure I shall turn sonnet’: Writing or Being Written in ‘Love’s Labour’s Lost’. *Cycnos*, 2015, *Love’s Labour’s Lost de Shakespeare ou l’art de séduire*, 31 (1), pp.35-46. hal-02511473

HAL Id: hal-02511473

<https://hal.univ-reims.fr/hal-02511473v1>

Submitted on 22 Feb 2021

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“I am sure I shall turn sonnet”: writing and being written in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*

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Whether it be Don Armado or the four young courtiers, love immediately gives rise to writing in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*¹. The play abounds in written objects, and the fact that its starting point is the young men’s oath to live according to the rules of their “academe”, further stresses the importance of the written word. In the first scene, we see the young men actually signing their oath, one after the other, and this visual sign literally demonstrates the importance of textuality in the play. The text of the play underlines the acts of writing in the scene: “Your oaths are passed, and now subscribe your names”, the King orders (1.1.19); Longaville and Dumaine sign the oath, although it is not specified in the stage directions, but modern editors add the acts of signing, usually at lines 27 and 32. As for Berowne, after some hesitation, his “I’ll write my name” (1.1.117) finally turns to “So to the laws at large I write my name” (1.1.153). Armado’s letter, as it is read out on stage in the first scene, is also an example of writing as a visual sign, whose presence on stage is reinforced by the references to the mechanics of writing in the letter itself, when Armado refers to the event “that draweth from [his] snow-white pen the ebon-coloured ink, which here thou viewest, beholdest, surveyest, or seest” (1.1.230-1). Armado’s letter, which parodies the excesses of euphuism, constitutes one of the starting points of the play’s association of loving and writing, a pattern from which, incidentally, Armado dismisses Costard, “That unlettered small-knowing soul” (1.1.236). Being “unlettered”, Costard is ejected from the symbolic space of loving, since he cannot write.

As Berowne himself admits it, to love is to “write a thing in rhyme” (4.3.173). Writing is inextricably related to love in the play, even though that combination is not specific to *Love’s Labour’s Lost*: “In Shakespeare’s romantic comedies, to be in love is to write” (Kiefer 2004 127). The essential link between loving and writing can be traced to the

¹ All references to the play are to *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, ed. William C. Carroll, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Petrarchan tradition: this play, like many others, uses the *topoi* and language of Petrarchism, to the point of integrating sonnets in the text. Many sonneteers also stressed the materiality of writing by referring to concrete objects such as ink and pen and to the actual act of writing². Like the sonnets it sometimes imitates, the play is a “verbal artefact” that draws attention to its own artificiality. What Ronald David Bedford says about the sonnet could also apply to *Love’s Labour’s Lost*: “Its fashionable and inevitable cultivation by poets wishing to explore the pains and joys of the experience of human love also draws attention to, and confirms, its public and ‘artificial’ nature” (Bedford 24). Cathy Shrank, in her study on mid-Tudor sonnets, has also pointed to the fact that sonnets are not necessarily perceived, in early modern England, as emotional and spontaneous, and that they could, as the poet George Gascoigne put it, “serve as well in matters of love as of discourse”³. *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, more than a play whose subject matter is love, is a “discourse” on love.

The materiality of the written word is almost constant in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. An oath is signed, then letters are read out on stage, or exchanged, carried by messengers, albeit not always given to the right person, and poems are recited from a piece of paper. Thus, the written text is a prop on the stage of the play, a visual sign for the spectators to see. In the “eavesdropping” scene (4.3), the attention of the spectators is not just on the reading of sonnets as a poetic language that disrupts the actual drama but, as Frederick Kiefer remarks, the poems are entirely recited, and “the attention [is] to written words as inscribed on physical objects” (Kiefer 2004 129). Letters or poems are read and analysed and become objects of study. When Rosaline is given the letter addressed by Armado to Jaquenetta, the physical action involving the prop, the letter bearing written word, is stressed by the repetition of the word “letter” — “I have a letter...” (4.1.51); “O thy letter, thy letter!” (4.1.52); “This letter is mistook” (4.1.55); “Who gave thee this letter?” (4.1.94) —, the whole text of the message is read out on stage, and commented upon: “What

² See Christine Sukic, “‘Stella is not here’: Sidney’s Acts of Writing as Acts of Erasing”, *Etudes Epistémè* 21 (2012); on textual materiality, see also Joachim Frenk, *Textualised Objects. Material Culture in Early Modern English Literature*, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag, 2012.

³ George Gascoigne, “Certayne notes of Instruction concerning the making of verse or ryme in English, written at the request of Master Edouardo Donati”, in Gascoigne, *The poesies of George Gascoigne Esquire* (London, 1575), sig. U2^v (Shrank 35).

plume of feathers is he that indited this letter?", the Princess asks (4.1.87), with the verb "indite" suggesting a literary composition. The literary aspect of Armado's letter is further stressed by Boyet when he says: "I remember the style" (4.1.89). The written texts of the play rarely elicit memory, whether from literate or illiterate characters: the young men are quick to forget about the prescriptive aspect of their signatures on the "oath", while Costard gives the two letters he has been entrusted with to the wrong person. So the only element that remains from Armado's letter is the "style".

The poems are also given materiality within the dramatic text of the play, in act IV, scene 3, of course, when three of the young men read out their poems, but also in 4.2, when Nathaniel and Holofernes carefully analyse Berowne's sonnet. The poems of the play themselves are imitations of other texts and use the conventions of love poetry or romance, and as such, they also refer to other written texts. For instance, Berowne's sonnet uses the metaphor of the woman as a book ("Study his bias leaves and makes his book thine eyes", 4.2.97). Sonneteers then commonly used the metaphor of the woman as a written text, as Eva Rachel Sanders has shown. Sir Philip Sidney employs the same image in the *Arcadia*, when Pyrocles purports to be a reader of Philoclea's eyes: "Ah sweet Philoclea, do you think I can think so precious leisure as this well spent in talking? Are your eyes a fit book, think you, to read a tale upon? Is my love quiet enough to be an historian? Dear princess, be gracious unto me"⁴. Longaville's sonnet contains a similar metaphor when he talks of "the heavenly rhetoric of thine eye" (4.3.52).

By using the conventional metaphor of the loved woman as a written text (a book or any text that can be read and deciphered), the play stresses its indebtedness to the Petrarchan tradition. There are numerous examples in the sonnet sequences that are more or less contemporary to the play, such as Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, in which the persona can "read letters fair of bliss" (sonnet 56) on his mistress's face, while her eyes are called "the fair text" (sonnet 67), and her cheeks are "the blushing notes [...] in margin". Eva Rachel Sanders has shown that the metaphor of women as texts is a frequent one in early modern literature and that the dominant discourse is that of a representation of "men as writers and women as texts to be inscribed" (Sanders 138). Writing can thus be understood as a form of masculinity. It is true that in the play,

⁴ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed. Maurice Evans, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, p. 375 (Lamb 64).

acts of writing as acts of loving are exclusively restricted to the male characters and the women of the play are objects of love more than they are its actors. Men are, after all, “the authors of these women”, as Berowne asserts (4.3.328). However, women’s textuality turns them into figures of authority: “They are the books, the arts, the academes”, Berowne says, talking about women’s eyes (4.3.321), while male characters can also be associated with textuality, and be not only authors but written texts themselves.

Several characters of the play seem to embody “books”. Nathaniel and Holofernes are “bookish” characters, and their relation to reading and writing is so intense that it takes on a bibliophagic turn. Talking about Dull, who has very small Latin, Nathaniel explains to Holofernes: “Sir, he hath never fed of the dainties that are bred in a book. / He hath not eat paper, as it were, he hath not drunk ink” (4.2.21-22). The relation to books is thus given materiality by a direct association of the body and the material objects of writing. A similar image is used in Act I, scene 1 when Longaville describes the “three years’ fast” with food imagery related to reading: “The mind shall banquet though the body pine” (1.1.25). The four young men themselves are called “bookmen” by the Princess (2.1.223) or “bookmates” by Boyet (4.1.93), a word that refers to schoolmates, but that takes on a deeper significance in relation with a whole network of textual images. Navarre, after having met the Princess, is described by Boyet as having book-like features because he is in love: “His face’s own margin did quote such amazes...” (2.1.243). His face can be read like a page in a book with quotations in the margins (the “amazes”). Thus, many of the male characters of the play seem to be physically encompassed by their adherence to book culture.

As for Armado, another bookish creature, he vows he shall “turn sonnet” at the end of act I, scene 2. As William C. Carroll explains it in his footnote in the Cambridge edition, to “turn sonnet” means to turn into a sonneteer (Shakespeare 81), but the phrase is ambiguous enough to suggest that Armado himself is a written text, both as Shakespeare’s character but also as a would-be Petrarchan lover. When the Princess calls him a “plume of feathers” (4.1.87), she is referring to his flamboyant style as well as to his essential character as an ineffectual feather-quill. Armado is a braggart, in loving and writing as well as in war making and it is tempting to see that the “pen” with which he proposes to write “whole volumes in folio” (1.2.150-1) is also a “penis” through verbal association, since it was a frequent pun in early modern

literature⁵, which would suggest that he is an impotent lover as well. Finally, as a book, Armado himself is a dictionary of difficult words, a “linguistic metaphor” (Magnusson 54) and a proponent of inkhornism.

The material objects of writing could be seen as structural elements of the play and of the plot. The plot is structured by written texts, its starting point being the text of the oath that has to be signed. Even if it is almost immediately questioned, it provides the main frame of the play. In the first scene, the subplot is also triggered by Armado's letter, which is read out on stage. Armado himself is first mentioned as the author of that letter, and the text of his letter is known before the actual character appears on stage in the second scene. So structurally, the written text is quite relevant to the unfolding of the plot. The same could be said about the letters mistakenly given to the wrong character, as Berowne's message delivered to Jaquenetta, and commented upon on stage by Nathaniel and Holofernes, while Armado's letter reaches Rosaline at 4.1.51 and is read on stage by Boyet. In act IV, scene 3, more acts of writing are actually integrated into the plot of the play when the four young men overhear each other reading out poems that they have written for the women they love, even though of course, there is already a sense of contradiction as those poems go against the oath signed in the first scene of the play.

Some actual acts of writing are integrated into the plot but turn out to be less important than what they first appeared, such as the king of France's letter to Navarre given to him by the Princess in act II, scene 1. The letter, whose contents are not mentioned again in the play until 5.2.713, in which we learn indirectly that the suit has been granted (but with no further details) is in fact the narrative pretext of the four young women's visit to the court of Navarre.

Finally, the play's starting point also concerns books as the seat of knowledge and study, since the four young men, at the beginning of the play, forfeit all commerce with women so that they can devote all their time to the reading and the studying of books, “painfully to bore upon a book”, as Berowne calls it in 1.1.74.

The written text, in early modern culture, was supposed to be one of the seats of memory⁶. One of Whitney's emblems, “*Scribit in*

⁵ On the pen/penis pun, Eric Partridge draws attention especially to Gratiano's pun in *The Merchant of Venice* (“I'll mar the young clerk's pen”, 5.1.237) (Partridge 158).

marmore laesus" (the injured man writes in marble), points to the intrinsic preservatory quality of writing⁷, a idea which is found in *Hamlet*, when the Danish prince calls for his "tables" (or notebooks) so that he can erase all preceding memories and write down his tragic predicament as a would-be revenger (*Hamlet*, 1.5.107-108). Reminiscence was also thought to be triggered off by writing, even though, as Richard Yeo has recently shown, there was also the danger that writing could encourage laziness in memory (Yeo 29).

The association of memory with the written word is a *topos* that often appears in early modern poetry, especially the sonnets. Shakespeare himself explores the wisdom of the old Latin proverb, *verba volant, scripta manent* — spoken words fly away, written words remain — as in sonnet 55 ("Not marble, nor the gilded monument"), in which it is the sonnet itself that constitutes the "living record of [the lover's] memory", where the lover can "still find room / Even in the eyes of all posterity", "room" being a common poetic pun since it is the English translation of the Italian "stanza".

The play seems to question the legitimacy of this *topos* and the capacity of the written text to be the depository of memory. Indeed, if reminiscence can be helped by writing words on a piece of paper, it does not seem to be the case in the play: from the very first, the power of the text to create a sense of truth and sacredness that is characteristic of oaths is challenged, and on the contrary, the text almost immediately loses its ability to maintain a sense of truth and places perjury on the very threshold of the play. In the debate between speech and writing, which is, as William C. Carroll pointed out, part of the play's background (Carroll 24)⁸, the relevance of writing is clearly deflated by the power of the spoken word.

For instance, a character such as Costard, who is illiterate and never quite grasps the meaning of words, especially if those words are not English, has a subversive function towards language in the play. He, in fact, manages to re-appropriate his dramatic place in the play after Armado dismisses him in his letter read in the first scene, and he actually

⁶ See for instance the study on memory and the written text in *Hamlet* by Peter Stallybrass, Roger Chartier, J. Franklin Mowery and Heather Wolfe, "Hamlet's Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Renaissance England", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55 (2004), pp. 379-419.

⁷ On this, see Kiefer 1996: 239.

⁸ On the same subject, see also Terence Hawkes, "Shakespeare's Talking Animals", *Shakespeare Survey* 24, 1977, p. 47-54.

debunks the references to literature or bookish knowledge expressed by the literate or pedantic characters. For instance, in act III, scene 1, Armado asks him to give "*l'envoy*" (1.60), that is to say, he uses a typically poetic word referring to the last stanza or last part of a poem, a word that would have been construed as affected and ridiculous in Shakespeare's time (Carroll 35). Costard misunderstands the word. By doing so, he discredits Armado's intellectual and literary claims and instead introduces coarse humour in the passage, especially scatological references. William C. Carroll explains in the Cambridge edition that the word "*l'envoy*" was associated with the scatological by Thomas Nashe (Shakespeare 96). Costard himself understands "captivated" as "constipated" in the same scene (3.1.108-10) and also introduces bawdy into the dialogue by mishearing Armado's "enfranchise" (3.1.104) and taking it to refer to a prostitute called "Frances". Thus, Costard deflates the value of words and the fascination that is attached to them by the more learned characters — especially words that are rare and more likely to be found in a book — and instead introduces a sense of instability in language that subverts the relevance and the status of the written word.

The play's starting point itself questions the significance of the written word, since the young men swear to devote their entire lives to the study of books through an oath which is immediately envisaged with scepticism even before it is signed by all. Indeed, Berowne is quick to point to the contradiction of the pledge and to the opposition between bookish truth and the truth of sensuality ("To seek the light of truth, while truth the while/ Doth falsely blind the eyesight of his look" (1.1.74-6). Berowne's remarks constitute the first attack on bookish learning as denying the ultimate truth of experience.

Finally, the performative quality of love poetry is ironically put to the test, since the young women of the play do not seem to give in to their male counterparts' amorous discourse. In that, the play is close to the essential pattern of Petrarchan sonnets, according to which the woman who is the object of the persona's love remains distant and is forever inaccessible. The play recreates that structure by having young men write sonnets that fail to reach their addressees (sometimes literally so) and to seduce them. Like the Petrarchan sonnets that can be seen as self-reflexive forms whose subject is writing and not love, the play does not really envisage the matter of love other than as a occasion to write and converse. Like the sonnets again, the play is studded with references to writing as a dominant social activity.

For those reasons, *Love's Labour's Lost* can be situated within the general framework of the mannerist aesthetics, this “artistic repertoire of forms” (Würtenberger 10) which can be detected in European art and literature throughout the sixteenth century, maybe somewhat later in England than in the rest of Europe⁹. This is all the more obvious as the play shares with the love sonnets of its time an attempt to re-define mimesis, a taste for self-reflexivity, as well as a stress laid on authors and their style, or *maniera*.

The presence of texts-within-the-text points to the deliberate creation by the playwright of a secondary level of imitation: Shakespeare's aim in the play is not to imitate reality — according to the traditional Aristotelian definition of mimesis — but to create another plane of reality. Sir Philip Sidney, opposing imitation and invention, explained in the *Apology for Poetry* how poets can create that other poetic world, that he called “another nature”: “Only the poet, disdain[ing] to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like” (Sidney 218). Accordingly, no attempt is made in *Love's Labour's Lost* to create verisimilitude and, on the contrary, the artificiality of the plot and the situations is put to the fore. Each of the four young men is miraculously faced with one of four young women that they almost immediately fall in love with, as if “Jack should have Jill” (except he does not). The subplot also parallels or rather parodies the main plot, as with Armado's attempt at being a lover and a writer. The inclusion of several secondary texts such as letters and sonnets in the main text as well as the pageant at the end also creates artificiality by emphasising the act of creation and by providing a *mise en abyme* that questions the traditional Aristotelian mimesis. The plot itself, being so tenuous, lays the stress on the style more than on the events or the action on the stage. This impression of artifice is reinforced by the references to playing and games, and the rules of the conversational games based on verbal play turn the comedy into a “ludic space” (Larson 96) and relate it

⁹ On Shakespeare and mannerism, see Gisèle Venet, “Les comédies maniéristes de Shakespeare”, in Didier Souiller (ed.), *Maniérisme et littérature*, Paris, Orizons, p. 295-307 as well as her “*Twelfth Night* et *All's Well That Ends Well*: deux comédies que tout oppose, ou deux moments d'une même esthétique?”, *Études anglaises* 58 (2005, 3), p. 276-92.

even more to a courtly context. This strengthens the idea that the act of writing is a game, an effortless activity that aristocrats accomplish with a nonchalance that Castiglione called *sprezzatura* and that best described Sir Philip Sidney's casualness in *Astrophil and Stella*: "Stella: now she is named, need more be said?" (sonnet 16). The play, imitating in that the poetics of failure that characterise contemporary sonnets, stresses its own inefficiency, the lovers' inability to seduce, and the abortive ending of the play. Sidney Thomas interpreted Marcadé's entrance on stage and his announcement as the end of mannerist artifice and the intrusion of reality (Thomas 243). This ending could also be seen as a deliberate attempt to avoid the expected "happy ending" of the comedy and to remind the spectators that it is the playwright's own choice to have an abrupt closing of the play that is not even a denouement since there is nothing to clarify or to resolve.

Finally, the play is fraught with self-reflexive comments that are typical of Shakespeare, but that have greater impact in *Love's Labour's Lost* since the acts of writing dominate the stage more than action in the conventional sense. There are many writers in the play, good or bad ones, as well as many critics of written texts, and the play should also be placed in the context of writing as a social activity in the educated social classes of early modern England. The four young courtiers are "authors" (4.3.328) and as such, their acts of writing serve as a basis for their social bonding: "the love letters and sonnets provide another signatory bond" (Breitenberg 443). Conversely, Armado is the parody of an aristocratic writer, whose "sable-coloured melancholy" (1.1.221) associates him with all the sonneteers of his time. He forfeits his claim to military fame in order to devote himself to the writing of "whole volumes in folio" (1.2.150-1) but he has little critical distance towards his own work. The same cannot be said about Berowne, who (indeed, very much like a sonneteer himself) forswears "speeches penned" (5.2.402) and high-flown rhetoric but who does so, ironically, in the form of a sonnet, a paradox that is no doubt noted by Rosaline, who doubles the irony by giving him the following comment on his poem: "*Sans 'sans'*, I pray you" (5.2.416). The circulation of texts in the play also reflects social practices in Shakespeare's time. For instance, Shakespeare's "sugar'd sonnets" were circulated among his friends (as Francis Meres's *Palladis Tamia* famously hinted at in 1598) before they were published in 1609, with or without the author's consent.

It might seem paradoxical that Shakespeare should choose to reflect on writing and authorship in a courtly context, while he himself

belonged to the middle class and, as far as we know, did not attend university. Felicia Londré noted this discrepancy when she wrote (in a discussion about the date of the play): “How would a young man fresh from a small rural town have dared to write one of his first plays for and about court society? In fact, how could one who spoke Warwickshire dialect have acquired the verbal facility and sophistication to lampoon a linguistic fad [Euphuism] that had flared briefly among courtiers when he was only fourteen?” (Londré 8). As well as a “civil war of wits” (2.1.222), there is clearly a class conflict in the play, with Holofernes and Armado trying to “appropriate the upper classes’ linguistic register” (Larson 95-6) while the eight young men and women appear to play games whose rules they all tacitly understand. There is definitely a social dimension to writing in the play, which reflects the literary and social context of the time. Shakespeare, like many of his contemporaries, represented a new class of writers that appeared after the development of the printing press and that broke free from the aristocratic ethos of the poet-courtier to invent modern authorship¹⁰. Sir Philip Sidney and the first English sonneteers were part of a more traditional aristocratic literary context still affected by the “stigma of print”¹¹. Many theoreticians of mannerism noted the importance of a social reconfiguration as well as an artistic and cultural one in the sixteenth century that put artistic mastery and artists to the forefront and that pointed to a social emancipation as well as to an artistic one. Mannerism does not mark the end of imitation (as *Love’s Labour’s Lost* amply demonstrates) but shows that the artist “imitates art, not *nature*” (Mauriès 23)¹². As such, the artist does not try to imitate the beauty of nature but it is beauty itself that learns from the beauty of the “written woman”: “beauty doth beauty lack / If that she learn not of her eye to look” (4.3.242-3).

¹⁰ On this, see of course Alain Viala’s seminal work : *La Naissance de l’écrivain. Sociologie de la littérature à l’âge classique*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985.

¹¹ A concept invented by the nineteenth-century critic Edward Arber and referring to the social convention according to which an aristocrat could not publish his literary works because it went against the tacit rule of not commercialising social activities.

¹² My translation.

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