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A Pregnant, Nameless Thing: Improvisation in *Love's Labour's Lost*

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Abstract

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Georgia C. Moos

There are persistent allusions in *Love's Labour's Lost* to both improvised and scripted performance. On its surface, the comedy appears to concern itself mostly with questions about the proper place of study in the human experience. This manifests in the distinction the play makes between romantic and academic pursuits and by its comparison of natural wit with cultivated erudition. This paper explores how all of these issues (performance, love, study, wit) intersect in *Love's Labour's Los*t and it seeks an explanation for their association in Shakespeare's mind. The argument is that the portrayal of these connected issues might be a reflection of the Harvey-Nashe pamphlet war — one of the play's many topical points of reference. The investigation finds that *Love's Labour's Lost* may have presented an opportunity for Shakespeare to make an indirect contribution to Harvey and Nashe's disagreement about wit and art. Shakespeare may have been partially motivated to do this in order to make his reply to some of Robert Greene's posthumously published remarks about the relationship between writing and performance in the theater in *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*. The paper concludes by suggesting the merit of investigating whether Shakespeare might have had some unorthodox ideas about improvisation that he would have had reason to conceal.

To Harpo —

So quick, bright things come to confusion

Section One — The Argument

Love's Labour's Lost opens by revealing that its characters proceed from the assumption that there are two distinct kinds of intelligence; there is knowledge that comes from books and knowledge that does not:

> "Berowne:What is the end of study, let me know?
>
> King: Why, that to know which else we should not know."
>
> Berowne: Things hid and barred, you mean from common sense?
>
> King: Aye, that is study's godlike recompense."[1]

This assumption causes a notable division between the people who find themselves at the court of Navarre. On one side, we have "bookmen" who mock the characters who "…hath not eat paper…hath not drunk ink," likening them to animals. On the other side, we have the natural wits — characters like Costard, who cannot read; Moth, who simply hasn't spent much time on this earth; and the gentlemen, who have apparently indulged more in leisure than study. The wits do not seem to find their lack of erudition a handicap. Instead, they display swift and acute verbal intelligence, which brings the bookmen to a halt when the gentlemen heckle them during the Pageant of the Nine Worthies. Does Shakespeare believe in the "godlike recompense" of study for its own sake; or would he have his audience agree that "the ground of

[1] *Love's Labour's Lost*, William Shakespeare (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.,2000), I.1.55-58.

study's excellence"[2] only exists because of profound experiences like love, which encompass every power of perception, both mental and physical? It cannot be for symmetry's sake alone that Berowne presents love as an alternative source of knowledge to academic study; while it is true that he has selfish reasons for arguing this, the action of the play itself seems to illustrate that point. One would be hard-pressed to look at the bookmen and say, "these people are wise," and the real opportunity for wisdom lies in the intense experience that awaits the gentlemen should they successfully commit to the labors they are assigned in the final scene. Berowne must "move wild laughter in the throat of death," and the rest of the retinue cannot study in relative comfort from home, but seek a "forlorn and naked hermitage." The comparison guides the audience to these questions: what sort of intelligence is worth having, and how much of that knowledge is accessible through the study of texts? Is a good mind cultivated by deliberately and methodically retaining what one reads, or is a mind as good as what it can make of the things that appear before it?

It is likely that these questions and comparisons would have called to mind for good portion of Shakespeare's audience the same debate that was raging in works outside the theater in the Harvey-Nashe pamphlet war — a highly public dispute between two well-known writers of the day. The biographical details of that dispute appear to be highly personal to both men and almost inscrutably petty, so the objective here is not to delve into them too deeply. The tension between art and wit in

[2] *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.3.291

Love's Labour's Lost is the same one that characterizes much of the philosophical disagreement between Harvey and Nashe, and the argument of this paper is that *Love's Labour's Lost* was written to hold up a mirror to that dispute and to be a vehicle for a few of Shakespeare's own delicate contributions to the controversy. The play has been associated with Harvey and Nashe for decades[3]. There is some dispute about the exact nature of its relation to the dispute because the play's date of composition is uncertain — some arguments link *Love's Labour's Lost* with the dispute, but they insist Shakespeare could not have been writing in response to *Pierce's Supererogation* because for various reasons the play must have been written the year before the pamphlet was published.[4] The argument made here proceeds from the idea that Shakespeare was moved in particular by the remarks made in *Supererogation* about Nashe and about *Pierce Penniless* and was therefore written in 1593. There are numerous situations and remarks in *Love's Labour's Lost* that are so strongly reminiscent of *Supererogation*, that it seems unlikely to be coincidence. Here is one connection that gets some of the most traffic:

> Holofernes: Master Person, quasi pierce one? And if one should be pierced, which is the one?
>
> Costard: Marry, Master Schoolmaster, he that is likest to a hogshead.[5]

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[3] Frances Yates, *A Study of Love's Labour's Lost* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 4.
[4] Wille, Schrickx, *Shakespeare's Early Contemporaries: the Background of the Harvey-Nashe Polemic And* Love's Labour's Lost (Antwerpen: Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1956).
[5] *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.2.80-85.

These lines have been identified as a pun on the title of Nashe's *Pierce Penilesse* and a direct allusion to Harvey's critical remarks about it and its author in *Supererogation:*

> She knew what she said that entitled Pierce the hogshead of wit; Penilesse, the tosspot of eloquence; & Nashe, the very inventor of asses. She it is that must broach the barrel of thy frisking conceit, and canonize the patriarch of new writers.[6]

Before proceeding much further in the argument, it is necessary to establish definitions of its terms. For the present purpose, art is: "An acquired ability…typically acquired through study and practice."[7] Wit is: "Quickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy, with capacity of apt expression; talent for saying brilliant or sparkling things, esp. in an amusing way."[8] Here is the comparison between art and wit as it is explicitly made in Gabriel Harvey's pamphlet, *Pierce's Supererogation*:

> The difference of wits is exceeding strange, and almost incredible. Good lord, how may one man pass a thousand, and a thousand not compare with one? Art may give out precepts and directories *in communi forma*, but it is superexcellent wit that is the mother pearl

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[6] Gabriel Harvey, *Pierce's Supererogation,* 1593. oxford-shakespeare.com/Nashe/Pierces_Supererogation.pdf.
[7] "art, n.1". OED Online. June 2021. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.oca.ucsc.edu/view/Entry/11125?rskey=2y80r1&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed June 29, 2021).
[8] "wit, n.". OED Online. June 2021. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.oca.ucsc.edu/view/Entry/229567?rskey=LtItgq&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed June 29, 2021).

> of precious invention, and the golden mine of gorgeous elocution. Nay, it is a certain pregnant and lively thing without name, but a quaint mystery of mounting conceit, as it were a knack of dexterity, or the nippitate of the nappiest grape, that infinitely surpasseth all the invention and elocution in the world, and will bung Demosthenes' own mouth with newfangled figures of the right stamp, maugre all the thundering and lightning periods of his eloquentest orations, forlorn creatures.[9]

Harvey's intention here is not to endorse wit —this is bitter sarcasm in the name of defending studied "art" which has been tested by time and nurtured by respected institutions with careful reference to canonized works; but behind his bravado there is a little pathos:

> Goodnight poor rhetoric of sorry books; adieu good old humanity; gentle arts and liberal sciences, content yourselves; farewell, my dear mothers, sometime flourishing universities: some that have long continued your sons in nature, your apprentices in art, your servants in exercise, your lovers in affection, and your vassals in duty, must either take their leaves of their sweetest friends, or become the slaves of that domineering eloquence, that knoweth no art but the cutting art, nor acknowledgeth any school but the

[9] Harvey, *Pierce's Supererogation*, 16

> courtesan school. The rest is pure natural, or wondrous supernatural.[10]

It is understandable that Harvey should feel protective of the universities, because Nashe openly attacks them in this delightful passage from *Strange News*:

> "…I protest I should never have writ passion well, or been a piece of a poet, if I had not arrived in those quarters [debtors' prison]…Come, come, if you will go to the sound truth of it, there is no place of the earth like it to make a man wise. Cambridge and Oxford may stand under the elbow of it. I vow if I had a son, I would sooner send him to one of the Counters to learn law than to the Inns of Court or Chancery."[11]

This alone does not wholly explain Harvey's bitterness about Nashe's theory of poetics expressed in the passage above — the detectable emotion in his words suggests that he senses an actual threat to his "dear mothers." Nashe's praise of prison — "the counter" — over the academy as a school for poets has some subversive implications, should its reader choose to take it even a little seriously; he deliberately, gleefully embraces non-respectability as a desirable — even necessary — quality in a writer. Should Nashe's theory of writing become too popular, this philosophy would be existentially dangerous to universities and destructive of any intellectual hierarchies they might uphold. He is suggesting that deliberate, extended contact with

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[10] Harvey, *Pierce's Supererogation*, 16
[11] Thomas Nashe, *Strange News*, 1593, http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Nashe/Strange_News.pdf, 39

canonized literature does not teach one how to impart passion or poetry to one's writing (let alone wisdom). In a way, Nashe seems to make a distinction between what can be learned and what can be taught. No teacher is required but the poet's own intense, distinctly non-literary experience — I say "distinctly non-literary" because one had to be literate to attend the universities, but not to attend the counter. This ability can be accessed only through the senses, not through written abstraction. If the art of poetry cannot be directly transmitted by an authoritative guide, this removes the need for an intermediary between the poet and his art.[12]

One might dismiss Nashe's statement as flippancy calculated to get a rise out of Harvey, but it appears that Harvey's offense becomes sharper because others take the idea seriously. *Pierce's Supererogation* is about Nashe, but it is written directly in response to a speech made by a gentleman Harvey does not name. He reproduces the speech in full and he borrows from it the pamphlet's title.[13] The speechmaker attributes an almost mystical — even sorcerous — quality to what Nashe learned in the counter:

> If M. Penniless had not been deeply plunged in a profound ecstasy of knavery, M. Pierce had never written that famous work of supererogation that…setteth both the universities to school. Till I see your finest humanity bestow such a liberal exhibition of conceit and courage upon your neatest wits, pardon me

[12] This is why churches *hate* it when people who claim to have direct contact with divinity gain too large a following.

[13] "…my mind was running on my halfpenny, and my head so full of the foresaid round discourse, that my hand was never quiet until I had altered the title of the pamphlet, and newly christened it *Pierce's Supererogation…"* Harvey, 19-20

> though I prefer one smart pamphlet of knavery before ten blundering volumes of the nine muses. Dreaming and smoke amount alike; life is a gaming, a juggling, a scolding, a lawing, a skirmishing, a war, a comedy, a tragedy; the stirring wit, a quintessence of quicksilver, and there is no dead flesh in affection or courage…You that purpose with great sums of study & candles to purchase the worshipful names of dunces & doddypolls may closely sit, or soakingly lie at your books… and they that will seek out the arch-mystery of the busiest modernists shall find it neither more nor less than a certain pragmatical secret called villainy, the very science of sciences, and the familiar spirit of Pierce's supererogation.[14]

This is what Harvey is reacting to when he says, "the rest is pure natural, or wondrous supernatural," to contrast Nashe's "ecstasy" with "gentle arts and liberal sciences." Even before *Supererogation*[15] Harvey sarcastically alludes to Nashe's "divine fury,"

> May it please gentle Pierce, in the divine fury of his ravished spirit,
> to be graciously good unto his poor friends, who would be
> somewhat loath to be silly sheep for the wolf or other sheep-biter.[16]

What, specifically are Harvey and his nameless interlocutor referring to when he calls Nashe's style *ecstasy*, *fury*, and *ravishment*? All three of these words imply a certain loss of conscious control, or wildness, which is a kind of artlessness. A notable

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[14] Harvey, *Pierce's Supererogation*, 19
[15] But also in *Pierce's Supererogation,* 19: "Pardon me, St. Fame. What the first pang of his divine fury, but notable vanity?"
[16] Gabriel Harvey, *Four Letters,* http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Nashe/Four_Letters.pdf, 23

feature of Nashe's style is its explosiveness, reckless pivoting from metaphor to metaphor, repeated exclamations — all of this is to produce the effect (or affect) of lucid raving, as though his words were spontaneously dashed out in the heat passion, "with no editor's pen to distill it to rhetorically balanced phrases."[17] In his own theory of writing, Nashe names this quality the "extemporal vein."[18] He introduces himself onto the scene of publication by insisting that this spontaneous quality in writing is the key to rendering wit and passion in a way that exceeds the careful training of arts-masters. If it *is* Shakespeare's intention to make *Love's Labour's Lost* a mirror for the Harvey-Nashe discourse surrounding wit and art, then the play's concern with the "extemporal vein" offers an explanation for the abundant allusions to stage performance — specifically, the memorization of scripted dialogue and improvised composition. Performance is seemingly incidental to the plot, but the motif appears so frequently and consistently that it merits attention. By his own proud admission, Nashe draws inspiration from the improvised clowning of the day, and his writing is crafted to emulate their speech. Harvey picks up on this, and he repeatedly criticizes Nashe's admiration and creative debt to extemporized clowning. As both an actor and a playwright, Shakespeare may have found sufficient reason to make his own contribution to the disagreement about the extemporal vein. The connections made to stagecraft by both Harvey and Nashe in their debate about writing might have also suggested to Shakespeare a way to make his own answer to defamations of

[17] Karen Kettnich, *The Age of Thomas Nashe*, Ch.6 (ed. Stephen Guy-Bray, et al, Ashegate, 2014), 108
[18] Thomas Nashe, *Preface to Greene's Menaphon*, 1589, http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Nashe/Preface_Greenes_Menaphon.pdf, 1

actors as a class and of him in particular made in *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*. The next section will make a more detailed argument for this possibility and will explore how the wit versus art debate bleeds into questions about performance and composition.

Section Two — Writers and Clowns

Shakespeare takes care to scatter allusions to stagecraft throughout *Love's Labour's Lost* when he simply didn't have to. Specifically, he alludes to the memorization of lines and the generation of improvised dialogue. Rather than a more direct approach to wooing, the gentlemen prefer to "devise some entertainment" for the ladies. Berowne and company make sure that Moth "well by heart" has "conned his embassage" on behalf of the their own improvised personas, and they are notably upset when Moth forgets his lines.[19] The Pageant of the Nine Worthies has no bearing on the plot, yet the failure of the amateur actors to deliver their lines is the comedic pinnacle of the play.[20] Much is made of performing theatrical parts — if we accept that *Love's Labour's Lost* was written to reflect the Harvey-Nashe discourse around art and wit, how might we account for the play's concern with improvised and scripted performance? As mentioned in the previous section, extemporal performance

[19] V.2-157-172 — Repeated insults from Berowne to Moth when the poor child forgets his lines.
V.2.157-172 —"A blister on his [Boyet's] sweet tongue, with my heart, that put Armado's page out of his part!"
V.2.479 — Berowne accuses Boyet: "You put our page out!"
[20] V.2.553-554 —"'Tis not so much worth; but I hope I was perfect. I made a little fault in 'Great'"
V.2.557 — Poor Nathaniel cannot even get past his first sentence and Costard is obliged to escort him offstage
V.2.594-617 — Holofernes is "put out of countenance."

was more than a tangential concern in the disagreement because of Nashe's "extemporal vein." Nashe openly expresses his respect for the craft of acting throughout his career. *Pierce Penniless* laments that players do not receive the credit they are due, and stresses that they ought to be respected as artists in their own right[21]. He pays the greatest compliment to improvising clowns. In addition to his "extemporal vein," Nashe bestows the dedication of *An Almond For a Parrot* (1590) upon Shakespeare's first star clown, William Kemp. According to Nashe, improvisation produces more lively and original works than the ones of great "art-masters" who simply defer to canonized authors:

> Let other men (as they please) praise the mountain that in seven years bringeth forth a mouse, or the Italianate pen that, of a packet of pilferies, affords the press a pamphlet or two in an age, and then, in disguised array, vaunts Ovid's and Plutarch's plumes as their own, but give me the man whose extemporal vein in any humour will excel our greatest art- masters' deliberate thoughts, whose inventions, quicker than his eye, will challenge the proudest rhetorician to the contention of like perfection with like expedition.[22]

[21] Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penniless, His Supplication To The Devil*, 1592. http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Nashe/Pierce_Penilesse.pdf, 30-31
[22] Nashe, *Preface to Greene's Menaphon*, 1

Speed of composition (or the appearance of it) is essential to the extemporal vein. In *Pierce Penniless*, Nashe wants to convey his authenticity by directly alluding to the fact that he is attempting to recreate a presence and timeliness natural to oral performance:

> *Redeo ad vos, mei auditores*,[23] have I not an indifferent pretty vein in spur-galling an ass? If you knew how extemporal it were at this instant, and with what haste it is writ, you would say so.[24]

Notably, Nashe is addressing listeners, or an audience — *not* readers. To him, it is not just emulation, but the *act* of improvisation itself that ensures originality. When he compounds that with a persona (this could be the character of Pierce or his own outrageous, exaggerated writer's voice) he "collapses the distinction between script and stage,"[25] creating a one-man-show in the theater of his readers' imaginations.

Harvey picks up on this technique and dismisses it as "Tarltonizing."[26] Richard Tarlton was William Kemp's predecessor as the most celebrated clown in England. His specialty (not dissimilar to much of the "improv" available today) was to compose rhymes on whatever theme the audience suggested to him.[27] When Harvey employs the word "tarltonizing" against Nashe, it is, in part, an accusation of plagiarism, but his previous use of the word reveals that part of the problem for

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[23] "I return my attention to my own voice, listeners"
[24] Nashe, *Pierce Penniless*, 24
[25] Kettnich, *The Age of Thomas Nashe*, 113
[26] Harvey, *Four Letters*, 24
[27] Kettnich, *The Age of Thomas Nashe*, 100

Harvey is spontaneous composition in writing when he attributes it to playwright Robert Greene in the same breath as "piperly extemporizing."[28]

It is ironic that Greene should be accused of employing a technique that necessitates some union between authorship and actor-ship, since in his best-known work, the posthumously published *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, he draws a harsh distinction between playwrights and performers. Greene's life, death, and works are closely interwoven with the Harvey-Nashe dispute and *Groatsworth* is no exception. This pamphlet is most famous nowadays for being the earliest printed allusion we have to Shakespeare's career in the theater, and it is directly referenced in *Pierce Penniless* and *Pierce's Supererogation*. In all the works mentioned here, these authors — Greene, Nashe, Harvey, and Shakespeare — sustain an indirect dialogue about the proper relationship between performance and writing. It is possible that Shakespeare had personal reasons to match any professional or philosophical motivation he might have had for involving himself in the dispute (however indirectly). *Groatsworth* characterizes actors as unfeeling "puppets," who ungratefully parasitize the wits of playwrights to make their living:

> Base-minded men, all three of you, if by my misery you be not warned, for unto none of you (like me) sought those burrs to cleave, those puppets (I mean) that spake from our mouths, those antics garnished in our colours. Is it not strange, that I, to whom

[28] Harvey, *Four Letters*, 13

> they all have been beholding, is it not like that you, to whom they all have been beholding, shall (were ye in that case as I am now) be both at once of them forsaken? Yes, trust them not, for there is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you, and being an absolute Johannes factotum is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.[29]

Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare is that "upstart crow." One of the three men Greene addresses here is a "young Juvenal,"[30] who is widely believed to be Thomas Nashe himself. The Harvey-Nashe trouble was born partly out of Nashe's desire to defend Greene's memory from Harvey, who had decided to beat the bones of the buried playwright in *Four Letters and Certain Sonnets* (1592). Nashe continued to defend Greene throughout the feud, but he adamantly disowns *Groatsworth* in the preface to *Pierce Penniless*:

> Other news I am advertised of, that a scald trivial lying pamphlet called *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* is given out to be of my doing.

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[29] Greene, *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, 1592, http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Greene/Greenes_Groatsworth.pdf, 19

[30] Greene, *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, 19
"With thee I join young Juvenal, that biting satirist, that lastly with me together writ a comedy. Sweet boy, might I advise thee, be advised, and get not many enemies by bitter words…Stop shallow water still running, it will rage, or tread on a worm and it will turn. Then blame not scholars vexed with sharp lines if they reprove thy too much liberty of reproof."

> God never have care of my soul, but utterly renounce me, if the least word or syllable in it proceeded from my pen, or if I were any way privy to the writing or printing of it.[31]

This same work that includes about a page of writing in praise of the theater as educationally and morally bracing, and in defense of professional actors;[32] we may conclude, then, that Greene's remarks about players are partly what must have given offense. One might expect Shakespeare to take the part of Greene's enemy, but as an actor who was condemned for not knowing his place and daring to be a serious playwright, Shakespeare would have had reason to do a good turn for a writer under fire for emulating actors — writing a play like *Love's Labour's Lost* would be a good opportunity to personally answer Greene, and, in the same stroke, to defend the players' champion who had publicly denounced the work that "warned" him about Shakespeare.[33]

On top of all the references to Harvey and Nashe's conversation about tarltonizing, Shakespeare layers plentiful and prominent allusions to another popular genre of extemporal theater that was known as *commedia all'improvisio* in its day, and which now goes by the name of *commedia dell'arte*. *Love's Labour's Lost* is one among many of Shakespeare's plays that bear the influence of *commedia dell'arte*. Its influence can be seen not only in it employment of stock figures (Holofernes is the

[31] Nashe, *Pierce Penniless*, 3
[32] Nashe, *Pierce Penniless*, 30-31
[33] Incidentally, there are some who believe Nashe may have collaborated with Shakespeare on *Henry VI, Part I (1592)* the year before *Groatsworth* was published. (Kettnich, 107, footnote 40) Greene's bit about the "player's hide" is a distortion of a line from *Henry VI, Part 3*.

dottore, Armado is the *capitano*), but even in such technical details as the brisk exchange dueling couplets with each line being inspired by the last. Some have even argued the possibility such lines were improvised[34] — but even if the actors were not extemporizing, the characters certainly are. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Love's Labour's Lost* the second-earliest recorded English use of the word zany[35] — a term specific to *commedia dell'arte*. The same goes for the word, pedant.[36] Andrew Grewar points out in the *Routledge Companion to Commedia Dell'arte* that the play's more outlandish personalities appear to have first inhabited Shakespeare's imagination more as stock figures of *commedia dell'arte* than named individuals:

> The word 'pedant' occurs in both the Quarto and Folio versions of the play, as a stage direction at the start of Act Four, scene two: 'Enter Dull, Holofernes, the Pedant and Nathaniel.' At the start of the next act, the direction is, 'Enter the Pedant, the Curate, and Dull.' Again, in the last scene (V.ii.581), during the 'Pageant of the Nine Worthies', there is the stage direction, 'Enter Pedant for Judas, and the Boy for Hercules.' And in the Quarto version (1598), the word 'Pedant' is used as a speech heading throughout

[34] Andrew Grewar, *Studies in Commedia Dell'arte* (University of Wales Press, ed. George, David J., and Christopher J. Gossip, 1993) 29-31.
[35] "zany, n. and adj." OED Online, Oxford University Press, June 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/232693. Accessed 20 June 2021.
[36] This information about both of these words was found in the *Routlage Companion to Commedia Dell'Arte*, 2014, p. 306, where it says that *Love's Labour's Lost* contains the earliest use.

> the rest of the scene, instead of 'Holofernes', the character's name. In many of the speech headings and stage directions, the name of a stock type is used in place of that of a character: Don Armado and Moth are referred to as the 'Braggart and his Boy' (III.i.1; V.i.29). Costard is almost always 'Clowne' and Nathaniel is the 'Curate.'[37]

These stock figures would have been recognizable to most members of his audience as being emblematic of *commedia all'improvisio*; It is plausible that Shakespeare wanted them to think of it specifically as they enjoyed the reflections of the Harvey-Nashe debate playing out before them. Shakespeare might have included the references to this specific genre to fashion another vehicle for answering at the same time Greene's harsh words about actors and Harvey's sneering at the extemporal vein.

It is true that the *comici* were not using quite the same performance process as rhyming English clowns like Tarlton — they were somewhat less spontaneous. Rather than working off of randomly suggested themes, they embroidered on spare plot outlines and pre-patterned routines;[38] however, *commedia dell'arte* productions shared with any other work in the extemporal genre the unification of performer and author because the *comici* were composing and organizing the dialogue onstage. The *comici* made little, if any, use of writing, because the genre existed in "theatrical

[37] Andrew Grewar, *Routlage Companion to Commedia Dell'arte* (ed. Judith Chaffee, and Olly Crick, 2015) 306-307

[38] Tim Fitzpatrick, *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes In the Commedia Dell'arte: Beyond the Improvisation/Memorization Divide* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1995), 7-11.

culture where literacy could not be taken for granted."[39] Some *comici* are said to have had *zibaldoni* — little notebooks where they recorded plots and scenarios. So few of these seem to exist that they were probably scarce to begin with — implying that the actors relied more on their own memories than any written reminder.[40] It is also true that there are a few surviving scripts of *commedia dell'arte* productions, but they are not at all common and mostly derived from improvised originals.[41] Though we have no direct evidence of Shakespeare having come into contact with *commedia dell'arte*, there is enough indirect evidence to make it a strong likelihood. Detailed references to it appear in works spanning across his career far beyond *Love's Labour's Lost*. In addition, there are surviving stage plots that contain similarities to *commedia dell'arte* scenarios that indicate these originally Italian techniques were put to work by English actors at the time *Love's Labour's Lost* was written:[42]

> "…stage directions mostly referring to entrances and exits, with some minimal instructions for action, and were set on pasteboard with a hole bored through the top so that it could be hung backstage as an aid to actors during performance. One of these 'plottes' contains the name of several actors who would join the Lord Chamberlain's men with Shakespeare in 1594…"[43]

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[39] Fitzpatrick, *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes In the Commedia Dell'arte,* 22.
[40] Fitzpatrick, *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes In the Commedia Dell'arte,* 15
[41] Fitzpatrick, *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes In the Commedia Dell'arte,* 16
[42] Grewar, *Studies in Commedia Dell'arte*, 18
[43] Robert Henke, *Commedia Dell'arte in Context* (ed. Christopher B. Balme, et al., Cambridge University Press, 2018), 117.

There is a distinct possibility that these "plottes" were aids to *commedia dell'arte-style* extemporization, and, if this is true, it means Shakespeare would have had direct and extended contact with performers who were already improvising in this way. All of this means that *Commedia all'improvisio* would likely have been accessible to Shakespeare. It would have been an example of a genre where authorship of plays was decentralized among its cast, and that flourished throughout Europe with little to no use of writing — let alone a fully realized script. Witnessing such a marvel of might have lead Shakespeare, playwright *and* actor, to ask questions about literacy's relationship to creativity and intelligence. Perhaps, then, Nashe's favorite kind of poetics that could be learned in "the counter," but *not* in the universities would not seem so strange.

Reminding his audience of the composition in performance that is essential to improvised theater might have served another purpose for Shakespeare aside from the celebration and defense of wit and the extemporal vein. For works composed orally — like plays generated in the *commedia dell'arte* style — the performance itself must be the authoritative version, because there is no sovereign record (a script, in this case) dictating what it must be: "…the performer is the authority…who knows the story and revalidates it each time it is told."[44] Without a script, the story does not exist outside the minds of the players unless it is being performed. Shakespeare might have presented allusions to these multiple improvised genres to protest Greene's term

[44] Fitzpatrick, *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes In the Commedia Dell'arte,* 29

"puppet," which implies that an actor has no agency or part in the performance except what is assigned to him by the playwright — the credit for any life the audience might observe in his "puppets" belongs to the script its writer. It is possible that Shakespeare's intention in bringing up improvised performances was not only to celebrate extemporal vein, but to remind audiences of plays that do not require playwrights, (or even writing). This would have been to make the point that playwrights who think of performers merely as tools rather than co-creators completely discount the embodiment and presentness essential to theater — that is, by asserting the superiority of the playwright's written work over the actor's performance, Greene is ignoring the fact that theater only occurs when imaginative *human beings* are on the stage. Viewed in this light, we see that *Groatsworth* has more than a circumstantial connection to Harvey-Nashe debate wit from "the counter" and the practiced art of the universities. These tensions center around the question of literacy's relationship to intelligence and creativity — that is, what access to these things do books really offer?

It ought to be acknowledged that for all this talk about Shakespeare's regard for the extemporal vein and composition in performance, there is the fact that Shakespeare has made his name with fully scripted plays. The beginning of this section mentioned that the other side of *Love's Labour's Lost's* preoccupation with improvised performance is its preoccupation the memorization of, and failure to deliver scripted dialogue, and this will be more fully addressed here. Shakespeare's intention in placing improvisation and memorization alongside one another is not to

say that one is superior to the other; it is to further refute Greene's dismissal of actors as "puppets" by highlighting what an actor's work actually is. This is best illustrated by the Pageant of the Nine Worthies. Costard fares best out of any of his fellow actors with speaking parts because he is this only one of his company to successfully deliver his lines in full. This is partly due to his ability to pick up whatever his audience throws at him, because he is already a skilled cooperative improvisor off the stage — his greatest skills appear to be banter and conversation. Holofernes has his own extemporal talent, but it appears he is used only to working alone, which is why he is ultimately thrown out of countenance and made to forget the lines he memorized. Costard's ability to navigate the unscripted and to be truly spontaneous onstage is what makes him a great Pompey — the hokey speech he memorizes has nothing to do with it. It is noteworthy, too, that Costard has never read his dialogue and is working entirely from oral memory. We know this because a major turning point of the plot hinges on Costard's inability to read.[45] Still, he is the only worthy who is "perfect" — so much for script. Shakespeare might have included this detail to illustrate that the composition and performance of a play have less to do writing and literary education than someone like Robert Greene might suppose.

Shakespeare's own customary process of play-making might have readily suggested these ideas to Shakespeare. Verbatim memorization was essential to early modern productions as it is today; in practice, however, these original productions

[45] IV.2.80-142. Costard did not simply confuse Armado's and Berowne's letters out of inattention. Berowne's sonnet is discovered because Costard *and* Jaquenetta have to ask Holofernes to read it for them.

were much closer to a modern "improv" show than any performance of Shakespeare we might expect to see now. Each player learned their part in relative isolation and had access only to their own dialogue and their own cues. Group rehearsals were scant — if they occurred at all. Because of this, actors routinely appeared onstage without full knowledge of the script or how their fellow actors would use the shared space. In order to pull off a convincing performance, actors would have been obliged to call upon their powers of improvisation. *Shakespeare in Parts* by Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern illustrates this well:

> "In one sense the actor learning a part and bringing it to the production is something like a trumpeter learning his part in an orchestral piece…There he is directed in his performance by a prompter who, like the orchestra conductor is responsible for basic timing…In another sense, the actor working from a part is nothing like so secure: the 'classical' score is subjected to jazz-like peril and contingency of performance…"[46]

Despite the implication in the word "jazz," the book calls this "actorly choice"[47] but explicitly avoids calling this improvisation, because English players were not composing dialogue in the moment of performance. Since, by the book's own admission, even a prompter could not entirely shield them from the "jazz-like peril and contingency of performance" it seems the only way to produce a cohesive —

[46] Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 78.
[47] Palfrey and Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts*, 78

therefore, convincing — performance would have been through cooperative improvisation, even if it didn't involve extemporized dialogue. It was noted earlier in this section that the Renaissance idea of improvisation was not necessarily like our own. *Comici* rarely pulled dialogue out of air; instead, their skill in extemporization was in making a skillful and split-second decision about how to deploy the tropes and material stored in their memories. Since early modern actors did not have full knowledge of the production, the implication is that improvisation was a necessary part even of performances with fully scripted dialogue. If, as argued above, Shakespeare was acquainted with the techniques *comici*, he may have been thinking of this filling in of the gaps as improvisation, and this might partially explain the preoccupation with the "extemporal vein" that we see in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

This reading of the play suggests an alternative interpretation of the findings of *Shakespeare In Parts*. Palfrey and Stern argue that Shakespeare took great care to write into his plays "…apparent confusions or ellipses — endemic to the part-technology, but also easily avoided or overcome by careful scripting…"[48] which were not oversights, but were designed to surprise his players with "…moments of actorly choice, often no doubt terrifying moments, that invariably coincide with moments of decision for the character."[49] This intention behind this maneuver, they say, was "to produce specific, foreseen responses in his actors, and from this to produce very particular expressive or thematic results,"[50] essentially harnessing the

[48] Palfrey and Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts*, 78
[49] Palfrey and Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts*, 78
[50] Palfrey, Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts*, 78

power of his actors' meta-theatrical alarm to animate a performance that looked more like unscripted, autonomous subjectivity. The idea that Shakespeare was prescient of his actors' reactions and *personal* emotions, which he manipulated in order to produce a desired effect in their performance might inadvertently be making Robert Greene's mistake by ascribing too much power to the playwright, and not enough to the actor. The shortest line between two points may be to think of these moments of choice as opportunities for play and improvisation, rather than psychological manipulation. Palfrey and Stern call these moments of surprise "terrifying" because the players were not fully prepared for them. In moments where there is an urgent task that must be seen through without pause, and the unexpected appears, any person must use what is around them and within them to improvise *quickly* (imagine driving a car, or being interviewed for a job). The only way to prepare for the truly unexpected is to become a good improvisor, which is probably what his actors would have had to do if Shakespeare was doing this on a regular basis. Such a situation would be more comfortable for actors who were already accustomed to improvising onstage, as it appears many of Shakespeare's actors may have been (footnote 56). It seems more likely that the players would have found some way to adapt using the skills they already had, rather than being terrified every time, and, if their livelihood was at stake, they would have had strong incentive to do this.

Whatever the case was, this practice of hinging critical moments in the story on the actors' *choice* is a mindful decentralization of authorial control. These deliberate "confusions and ellipses" by their very nature could not be taught or

memorized. They are designed to leave spaces in the script that the written dialogue will not fill — they must be "composed" by the actors. Consequently, the performance has a validity that is all its own, and the performers are given some share in authorship — not of the script, but of the story. We know Shakespeare collaborated with other playwrights — perhaps he saw this as collaboration with his fellow actors. It is also possible that he had an appreciation for the theatrical accomplishments that could come about through the intuitive intelligence of performers without memorization. Rather than being the "god in the machine"[51] of parts-technology, I would suggest that Shakespeare took a more playful approach to his work, that he was more of a Dungeon Master who created a world of set, specific rules for his players, but left them a margin of choice with the intention was to give his actors outlets for their own spontaneous creativity. The result would be something like an adaptation of Nashe's extemporal vein for actors who work from a script. It appears that Shakespeare was doing this at least as early as *Romeo and Juliet* (the play that comes directly after *Love's Labour's Lost*) and if there is something to the reading of *Love's Labour's Lost* set out here, it appears that improvisation was on Shakespeare's mind. Perhaps this preoccupation was partially motivated by love and respect for the performer's craft for its own sake, and that offering his actors opportunities to be spontaneous storytellers themselves was a conscious act of rebellion against the idea of playwrights as puppet-masters.

[51] Palfrey and Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts*, 79

In light of all this, how might Shakespeare's position on the Harvey-Nashe dispute be precisely articulated? It seems that he feels more closely aligned the extemporal vein as an ideal rather than with one man or the other. *Love's Labour's Lost* seems to invite the audience's sympathy both everywhere and nowhere at once. One of the comedy's greatest recommendations of itself to its paying audience is how well the script pulls off the "extemporal vein." All of the major characters of *Love's Labour's Lost* appear to value extemporization in the technical way that Nashe does. Quick wit is in celebrated in all circles for its power to move and delight the hearer. There is a family resemblance between Nashe's words in the preface to *Menaphon* and Rosalind's initial praise of Berowne's attracting an audience to himself like a street performer:

> His eye begets occasion for his wit,
> For every object the one doth catch
> The other turns to a mirth-moving jest,
> Which his fair tongue, conceit's expositor,
> That agèd ears play truant at his tales,
> And younger hearings are quite ravishèd,
> So sweet and voluable is his discourse.[52]

Armado calls upon the aid of "some extemporal god of rhyme"[53] when he "turns sonnet" for Jaquenetta. Moth's official title is page, but most of his work appears to fall in the category of entertainment. His jokes are appreciated all the more because

[52] *Love's Labour's Lost*, II.1.69-72
[53] *Love's Labour's Lost*, I.2.175-176

they are improvised; the speed of Moth's jests delights Armado just as much as the content:

> Now by the salt wave of the Mediterraneum, a
> sweet touch, a quick venue of wit! Snip, snap, quick
> and home! It rejoiceth my intellect. True wit! [54]

Costard has a distinctly technical appreciation of how Maria and Boyet can get their jokes to "come so smoothly off."[55] One might expect the hyper-literate Holofernes to be closer to one of Nashe's despised "arts-masters" than not, but here he is proudly doing a clown's work:

> This is a gift that I have, simple, simple, a
> foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes,
> objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions.
> These are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished
> in the womb of *pia mater*, and delivered upon the mel-
> owing of occasion. But the gift is good in those in
> whom it is acute, and I am thankful for it.[56]

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[54] Armado rejoices in Moth's wit in just about every exchange they have, but V.1.54-56 illustrates it best
[55] *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.1.143-145
[56] *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.2.65-71

Holofernes' "extemporal epitaph" is quite literally tarltonizing — he is composing a rhyme on a theme that was circumstantially suggested to him. The only difference here is maximalist erudition, as opposed to Tarlton's tongue-in-cheek obscenity.[57]

At the same time, Rosaline seems to become less enamored of Berowne's wit the more she observes the way it is deployed. This comes directly after the pageant scene, where Holofernes is mocked "out of countenance", and cannot get in a word of Judas' speech because he is mercilessly heckled by wits quicker than his. The last we ever hear from him is: "This is not generous, not gentle, not humble."[58] If *Love's Labour's Lost* was written to be a mirror for the Harvey-Nashe feud, and prompted by *Pierce's Supererogation*, then Holofernes' last scene is likely an illustration of the following passage:

> That frisking wine [wit], and that lively knack in the right capricious vein, the only book that holdeth out with a countenance, and will be heard when worm-tongued orators, dull-footed poets, and weather-wise historians shall not be allowed a word to cast at a dog.[59]

This would cast Harvey analogically as Holofernes, and Nashe (or people like him) as Berowne and company. Shakespeare might at least have had some compassion for Harvey; with a final line like that, it is difficult not to feel some sorrow on

[57] IV.2.86-88, Even then, Holofernes appreciates this tone in others, so long as they are good extemporizers. Here is his wonder at Costard's cleverness: "A luster of conceit in a turf of earth, fire enough for a flint, pearl enough for a swine. 'Tis pretty. It is well."
[58] *Love's Labour's Lost*, V.2.622
[59] Harvey, *Pierce's Supererogation*, 16-17

Holofernes' behalf — even if he *is* written to be so clownish. Berowne and company, as charming as they are, are written to be particularly cruel in this scene. This, along with the ladies' criticism of the way the gentlemen use their wits, implies some agreement with Harvey's criticism of Nashe's undue harshness:

> God shield quiet men from the hands of such cruel confuters, whose arguments are swords; whose sentences, murdering bullets; whose phrases, cross-bars; whose terms no less than serpentine powder; whose very breath, the fire of the match, all exceedingly fearful, save his footing, which may haply give him the slip.[60]

The heckling is funny, and in some cases this might cast the gentlemen in a favorable light, but they have no business behaving the way they do — *they* are the one who invited the Worthies there to perform. Worse, Holofernes is a man who works for his living, and he must this tolerate public humiliation because the people doing it socially outrank him. Yet again, the heckling might be some kind of poetic justice because Holofernes is vain and openly condescending to people less absurd than he is. The pedant has his own mean streak, and he does not hesitate to try to make Constable Dull, who did nothing to him, feel small for not having the same level of education as Nathaniel and himself.[61] It appears, then, that wit itself is not the problem. Berowne's suit is unsuccessful because he doesn't know how to win over an audience without making someone else look stupid — Rosaline will accept Berowne

[60] Harvey, *Pierce's Supererogation*, p. 17
[61] *Love's Labour's Lost*, V.2.13-33

only if he uses his powers for service and charity by completing a year essentially volunteering as a hospital clown. "A jest's prosperity," she tells him, "lies in the ear of him that hears it, never in the tongue of him that makes it."[62] The gentlemen must prove themselves to their beloveds by committing to long-term work. This is certainly something closer to art than it is to wit.

In spite of the play's apparent approval of slow, applied effort, it is safe to say that Shakespeare was a supporter of improvisation — he and Nashe spent their careers cultivating and emulating the extemporal vein in their own writing. However, this does present a paradox — to cultivate and emulate extemporaneity is to be an "arts-master," in some fashion. At the very least, it requires practice, which, by its nature, is a commitment to repetitive labor — this clashes with Nashe's ideals of speed and spontaneity. The problem is articulated admirably by Karen Kettnich:

> "The extemporal is never purely unscripted, and Harvey's two taunts of Tarltonizing set out false poles of scriptedness and spontaneity. The fantasy of pure spontaneous creation is always in tension with the other Renaissance models of invention: sets of stock figures and epithets, news and gossip, jokes and tropes packed in the storehouse of the mind and ready for use…for the well-stocked and quick wit, the readiness is all."[63]

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[62] *Love's Labour's Lost*, V.2.845-847
[63] Kettnich, *The Age of Thomas Nashe*, 113

Certain aspects of *Love's Labour's Lost* suggest that Shakespeare might have been aware of this contradiction, and that part of his aim in writing it was to point out the "false poles" of pure art or pure wit. The allusions to art, wit, Harvey, and Nashe are curiously layered around Holofernes in a number of ways. Returning to his speech about his own creative process,[64] he says himself that he carries his extemporized "forms, figures, and shapes" as if he were pregnant with them, and gives birth to them "upon the mellowing of occasion." In addition, they are "begot in the ventricle of memory" — he does not say *conceit* or *fancy*, as one might expect. This is a rather intense male-pregnancy metaphor to describe tarltonizing (again, he is literally doing this). Compounded, these conditions suggest that this is intentionally reminiscent of Harvey's snide remark in *Four Letters* about what he perceives to be the unoriginality of *Pierce Penniless*. He calls it the "very tympany of [Nashe's] tarltonizing wit," which is intended to evoke the swelling of a pregnant belly (making Tarlton the father).[65] It is unlikely to be a coincidence that Holofernes' character should be a reference to the stock figure of the *dottore*, and the models of Renaissance invention that he and Kettnich describe (in their own distinct fashions) are, in fact, the very art and technique of the *comici* that were discussed earlier. It is striking that Shakespeare combines all these associations in the pedant character, who is the most likely candidate in *Love's Labour's Lost* to be a caricature of Gabriel Harvey (a real, live "bookman"); and if he is not, Holofernes would be the sort of arts-man Nashe mocks except his own "tymapny of tarltonizing wit." Very shortly after the speech in praise

[64] *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.2.65-71
[65] Kettnich, *The Age of Thomas Nashe*, 106

of his own cleverness, Holofernes criticizes Berowne's poetry for being derivative: "Imitari is nothing. So doth the hound his master, the ape his keeper, the tired horse his rider."[66] The image of a pedantic arts-man dismissing a wit's work for being unoriginal may have served to further remind Shakespeare's audience of Harvey's insult to Nashe's tarltonizing, but the way Holofernes illustrates his point is strangely dissonant with what we know of Harvey's own love of erudition and art. The hound, ape, and horse images associate creative originality with wildness, while associating unoriginality with training, which, in a human, would be art. It appears, then, that Shakespeare wants to make some conflation between Harvey and Nashe in Holofernes. Similarities between a "cool" character like Berowne and an "uncool" character like Holofernes may be observed in multiple places — let us not forget that the King's men suffer at the hands of the ladies the same fate as the Worthies for their fanciful, yet shallow use of language.[67] All of this implies that the extemporal vein is, at bottom, another form of art. Whether wit is learned at the university or in the counter, it is a learned skill, and that makes it an art. It is possible that while he expressed a preference for extemporaneity, Shakespeare also wanted to point out that *both* Harvey and Nashe were assuming the false polarity between wit and art. By his own proud admission, Nashe's prized extemporal vein is a skill he *learned* — even if it was not in an academy — this makes it art. *Love's Labour's Lost* illustrates how wit

[66] *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.2.124-125. My thanks to Peter Holland for his note on line 125 that points out that "Holofernes seems to be linking imitativeness and docility"
[67] Rosaline's admonition to Berowne, "Sans 'sans,' I pray you" (V.2.417) could easily be applied to Holofernes. It must be the flourish she objects to, because there is no reason for her to object to her own native language.

can be as empty as the stuffiness of an art-master if it forgets the human being in front of it; but, if wit can acquire a certain sensitivity along with its power to move and delight, *then* it becomes something truly worthy of respect. The converse of this, of course, is that art is itself a form of wit. Holofernes' description of his creative process reminds us that every idea has a beginning — it is conceived in *somewhere* in the brain. If Shakespeare is pointing out that art and wit are not truly opposites, then it seems that the real argument is about whether there are alternative sources of knowledge to more venerable institutions. What, then, is the source of creativity? How and where might imagination and sensitivity be found and developed — in the study of other works, or in a profound ecstasy of knavery?

Part 3 — Concluding Thoughts: Arch-Mysteries

So far, this reading of *Love's Labour's Lost* has not accounted for the play's preoccupation with love. This section aims to amend that as far as time and space allow by suggesting how the interpretation might be pursued in that direction. As the title of the play indicates, passion, or erotic love, plays a more central role in the plot than performance, but they are linked to one other and to the art-wit dispute by the extemporaneity. To explore this connection, we must return our attention to *fury*, *ecstasy*, and *ravishment* — the words that Harvey and his anonymous speaker use to refer to his extemporal vein. The idea is that in these states of enthusiasm the time between the conception of a thought and its expression is short enough for it to seem as if there is no thought at all. The ideal state of mind for an accomplished improvisor

is to accept the first thought that comes to mind without judgement or deliberation — to the outside observer, these two states might appear to be quite similar.[68] Depending of the content of the performance, there are some who might say they were the same. All three of these words bear the connotation of being overcome with passion and in that moment losing one's will to a force of mysterious or supernatural origin — often with the result of prophetic or poetic trance.[69] Nashe's friends and enemies choose these words to describe his work because he takes care to express himself as though he were being carried along by his own passion and invention — almost as though he were raving. This sort of language appears repeatedly around extemporaneous composition in *Love's Labour's Lost*. When the gentlemen are engaging in filthy banter about their beloveds, the king teases teases Berwone: "What zeal, what fury hath inspired thee now?" There is Moth's "invocation" of his parents' spirits before he composes a rhyme on the spot for Armado: "My mother's tongue and my father's wit assist me!"[70] Very soon after, Armado utters his own prayer: "Assist me some

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[68] *Impro: Improvisation And The Theater* (Johnstone, 1979) is a book about teaching improv which illustrates this well and has some interesting things to say on this subject (especially in the sections, *Spontaneity* and *Masks and Trance*).

[69] "fury, n.4". OED Online. June 2021. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.oca.ucsc.edu/view/Entry/75739?rskey=wBgINn&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed June 29, 2021).

""ecstasy, n.3.b.". OED Online. June 2021. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.oca.ucsc.edu/view/Entry/59423?rskey=YxjFof&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed June 29, 2021).

"ravishment, n.2.a.". OED Online. June 2021. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.oca.ucsc.edu/view/Entry/158691?redirectedFrom=ravishment (accessed June 29, 2021).

[70] *Love's Labour's Lost*, I.2.91-94

extemporal god of rhyme, for I am sure I shall turn sonnet."[71] The lovers seem to be acting against their conscious will, unable to control their impulses; most notably, in the same speech as Armado's invocation of the extemporal god of rhyme, he fails to rationalize his own desire for Jaquenetta, reflecting: "Love is a familiar. Love is a devil. There is no evil angel but Love."[72] In an echo Nashe's argument and the words of anonymous supporter, the creativity and "wisdom" we in the lovers are the result of exposure to intense, distinctly non-academic experience. So, too, is love presented as an alternative, superior source of knowledge to academic study in particular. The senses are the truest source of art and information, rather than written abstractions; here, Berowne describes love as something that can be "learned,"[73] and is an alternative source of knowledge to literature:

> From women'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.

[71] *Love's Labour's Lost*, I.2.175-176
[72] *Love's Labour's Lost*, I.2.160-177
[73] *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.3.301-306
"But love, first learnèd in a lady's eyes, Lives not immurèd in the brain, But with the motion of all elements, Courses as swift as thought in every power, And gives to every power a double power, Above their functions and offices…Never durst poet touch a pen to write Until his ink were tempered with Love's sighs."

The plot, which begins with the gentlemen's oath to swear off love for the sake of academic study, is deliberately arranged so that this is a central tension in the character's minds.

It appears that Shakespeare wanted to engage specifically with connections made between these states and improvisation — by drawing an analogy between Nashe's extemporal vein as "profound ecstasy of knavery" and the clandestine, poetic fits of passion that the lovers experience. Whether he is serious about extemporaneity as a fury, or what his motivations might be for exploring it remain to be seen. With all this in mind, let us revisit the words of Harvey's nameless interlocutor about Nashe's ecstasy:

> Certes other rules are fopperies and they that will seek out the arch-mystery of the busiest modernists shall find it neither more nor less than a certain pragmatical secret called villainy, the very science of sciences, and the familiar spirit of Pierce's supererogation.

If we take these words seriously, as the anonymous speechmaker apparently does,[74] the implication is that the difference between what the university teaches and what can be learned in the counter is something deeper than the difference between

[74] Harvey, *Pierce's Supererogation*, 19
"The present consideration of which singularity occasioneth me to bethink me of one that this other day very soberly commended some extraordinary gifts in Nashe, and when he had gravely maintained that in the resolution of his conscience he was such a fellow as some ways had few fellows, at last concluded somewhat more roundly: 'Well, my masters, you may talk your pleasures of Tom Nashe…'"

"naughty" and "nice." Even if the speaker is being arch here, these words all have connotations, which, compounded, have a daring implication. The speaker appears to be playing with three meanings of the word "mistery."[75] By calling the arch-mystery a "pragmatical secret" and a "science," he is bringing to mind "the art and craft of a trade."[76] By giving it the credit for "Pierce's supererogation,"[77] he is deliberately alluding to theological mysteries. By naming it a "familiar spirit," he summons up a more magical connotation of "mystery."

It is not precisely clear what the speaker's motivation is in uniting craft, theology, and magic with one another in association with Nashe's extemporal comedic vein; but if the speaker is as solemn as Harvey makes him out to be, this is a daring association to make — especially when one considers that the works discussed here were written in a cultural climate in which it was customary for people to be dragged out of their homes by the authorities and killed simply for being Catholic[78] or for holding some other "wrong" spiritual belief. In this passage, all three of these meanings are openly associated with the extemporal vein acquired through inspired villainy. This is the same ecstasy that, in this paper's interpretation of the play, Shakespeare analogically unites with extemporally creative fits of passion in *Love's Labour's Lost*. It is true that whenever the "fury" is mentioned in the play, there is

[75] Original spelling from Yates, *A Study of Love's Labour's Lost*, 203
[76] "mystery, n.2.c". OED Online. June 2021. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.oca.ucsc.edu/view/Entry/124644?rskey=TL744B&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed June 29, 2021).
[77] "supererogation, n.1.a". OED Online. June 2021. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.oca.ucsc.edu/view/Entry/194275?redirectedFrom=supererogation (accessed June 29, 2021).
[78] Yates, *A Study of Love's Labour's Lost*, 32

always a reason to laugh at it, but it is also true that it is ultimately love that has the most potential for learning, rather than study or wit. It is also worth considering that Shakespeare's next comedy after *Love's Labour's Lost* is thought to be *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where he also deals with passion as it relates to the imagination, and which has its own supernatural and theatrical motifs. If Shakespeare has some serious designs on the "fury," perhaps Berowne's reasonable concern[79] that it is legally punishable by mutilation for women to be seen less than a mile from the court is more than a simple joke — notably, Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Kyd, Shakespeare's fellow playwrights, were both arrested for heresy in 1593, which is the same year this paper takes to be the date of *Love's Labour's Lost's* creation.

If Shakespeare is writing in agreement with Nashe's ideas that potentially threatened the authority of the universities, what other institutions might he have had in mind? What has been said just now is a suggestion which requires more investigation in order to become anything more than a suggestion; however, if the reading set out here *Love's Labour's Lost* and its place in the discourse about wisdom and inspiration of its time is found to be worthy of consideration, then it is also worth considering the possibility that in addition to being a light-hearted reply to Harvey, Nashe, and Greene, *Love's Labour's Lost* might also contain a more serious engagement with some of the the stranger ideas set forth by Harvey's anonymous speaker, and that the play might have presented an opportunity for Shakespeare to publicly reflect on them while remaining free to write another day.

[79] I.1.122-126 — Specifically, she might lose her tongue.

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