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Love's Labour's Lost

William Shakespeare · *c. 1595 · original English text*

The King of Navarre and three lords swear to live three years as scholars, seeing no women. The Princess of France arrives on embassy with her ladies, and the oath lasts about a scene. The comedy is a feast of wit—and it will not end like an old play. Jack hath not Jill. A twelvemonth of probation is the last word.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a vow against love be anything but perjury waiting to happen, and why will this wooing not end in a dance?

"Our wooing doth not end like an old play. Jack hath not Jill."

Berowne · Act V, after the Princess has imposed a year's delay

The academy of Navarre is vanity dressed as discipline: fame on brazen tombs, and a rule against the very court that is riding toward the gate. The men fall, write sonnets, disguise themselves as Muscovites, and are outwitted by the women they meant to impress. Then a messenger brings the French king's death. The Princess cannot make 'a world-without-end bargain' in a moment; each lady sets a task, and Berowne must visit the sick and jest in a hospital for a year. 'The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo.' The labor of love is not lost so much as postponed until it can be more than a show.

KEY CHARACTERS

Ferdinand, King of Navarre
The young king who swears an impossible academy and must learn a longer bargain.

Berowne
The wittiest of the lords, first to doubt the vow and last to accept a year's hard jesting.

the Princess of France
The embassy's head, merrier than the men and graver when the news comes.

Rosaline, Maria, and Katharine
The ladies who outplay the Muscovite masque and set the terms.

Don Adriano de Armado, Costard, Holofernes
Braggart, clown, and pedant: the other school of language in the play.

JACK HATH NOT JILL

> *"Our wooing doth not end like an old play. Jack hath not Jill."*
> **Berowne** · Act V

> *"The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo."*
> **Armado** · The close

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
A Brazen Vow
ACT I

Ferdinand, Longaville, Dumaine, and Berowne swear to three years' study and to see no woman. Costard is already in trouble with the opposite rule.

- 'Let fame, that all hunt after in their lives, / Live registered upon our brazen tombs' is the king's opening ambition.
- Berowne doubts the oath and still signs it.
- Armado, the braggart Spaniard, is set to keep Costard: a comic academy beside the courtly one.

> *"Let fame, that all hunt after in their lives, Live registered upon our brazen tombs,"*
> **the King** · Act I, opening the vow

02
An Embassy of Ladies
ACTS II–III

The Princess and her three ladies encamp outside because the vow will not let them in. Letters miscarry; Armado loves Jaquenetta; Berowne is already caught.

- The women are the play's sounder wits from the first interview.
- Cupid, as Berowne will admit, is not kept out by a statute.
- Boyet, attending the Princess, sees more than the lords want seen.

03
Sonnets and Muscovites
ACT IV–V, EARLY

Each lord is overheard in love. They confess, then go disguised to entertain the ladies, who, warned, exchange favors and mock them.

- The sonnets are good and are also evidence of perjury.
- The Muscovite masque is vanity unmasked by a swapped token.
- The men are not hated; they are not yet trusted.

04
The Nine Worthies
ACT V, THE SHOW

The rustics and Armado present the Nine Worthies. The lords, still stung, mock the players until the Princess checks their unkindness.

- How the court treats a poor show is a test of courtesy.
- Armado's dignity, even when foolish, deserves a better audience.
- The pageant is interrupted by news that will change the genre.

05
A Twelvemonth and a Day
ACT V, THE CLOSE

A messenger brings the French king's death. The ladies will not marry now. After a year of tasks—the king in a hermitage, Berowne among the sick—the wooing may end. Armado closes the door: Mercury after Apollo.

- 'A time, methinks, too short / To make a world-without-end bargain in' is the Princess's just refusal of a hasty vow.
- The delayed ending is the play's honesty.
- 'You that way, we this way' splits the stage as mourning splits the feast.

> *"The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo."*
> **Armado** · The last spoken line

Vows and Perjury · Wit · A Delayed Marriage · Courtesy · Fame

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #1510. The title in this library is Love's Labour's Lost (slug loves-labours-lost).
2. Exact: "Our wooing doth not end like an old play. / Jack hath not Jill." "The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo." "Let fame, that all hunt after in their lives, / Live registered upon our brazen tombs,"
3. The Princess: "A time, methinks, too short / To make a world-without-end bargain in." The year-and-a-day delay is the true ending; do not tidy it into an immediate wedding.
4. The play is dense with wordplay and a small plot. It is excellent for older students who can enjoy language, and the last news is a serious check on the comedy, not a flourish.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1510, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/loves-labours-lost/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.