LOL and LLL

Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin

To cite this version:

Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin. LOL and LLL. 2019. halshs-02268974

HAL Id: halshs-02268974

https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02268974

Preprint submitted on 22 Aug 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

LOL and LLL

Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

Contemporary society is obsessed with and suffers from the offensive impact that words can have. The web has obviously become the playground of evil tongues and the ideal and easy medium for abuse, mockery, slander, verbal humiliation or hateful speech, all speech acts that create or are signs of crises. In February 2019 in France, a group of journalists and a kind of boys' club that went under the pseudonym 'LOL' (Laugh Out Loud League) on social networks was denounced for having harassed mainly female colleagues through that faceless, anonymous medium. The collective abuse which took women as targets was supposed to make the group 'laugh out loud'; it could have been 'no abuse', as Falstaff says in *2 Henry 4* (2.4.320),[1] but it seems on the contrary that jesting turned into mockery and insult. In fact, these words circulating mainly on Twitter caused many cases of trauma and had a concrete impact on the victims' careers and lives.

Contemporary politics has to deal with the way words must, may, or can be controlled to avoid outrageous torrents of linguistic injuries be left unpunished. Words have probably never had such an extensive, global power than they have today, at a time when they circulate quicker and at a wider scale than they ever have. In the all virtual digital world, the power of words has never been so *real*, and words definitely act. When referring to abusive words that are exchanged on the web, commentators and politicians refer to these words as acts, giving J. L. Austin's famous theory on 'how to do things with words' (Austin, 1962) all its relevance.

In Shakespeare's days, the world was smaller; words' wings did not carry them as fast and far as they do today, but Shakespeare's world was obsessed with the insulting impact of words too. It is from this LOL league scandal that the idea of this paper emerged as it appeared to me that it could be read in relation to *Love's Labour's Lost* and that the mechanisms that are at work in this LOL scandal could illuminate *LLL*. This paper will start by focusing on the performance of the Pageant of the Nine Worthies, which can be seen as an episode of collective mockery. Then it will argue that *LLL* is a kind of "Facebook", that is a book or a play that reveals a preoccupation with one's *face*. And finally, it will briefly suggest that the end of the play shows a way out of crisis, by refusing a bad use of laughter and promoting a good use of it.

The reign of "mockery merriment"

In Shakespeare's plays, crises are often triggered off and nourished by words, and especially by insults. By insults, we mean words that can be delivered and/or received as insults. When studying insults, one should always have in mind Évelyne Larguèche's illuminating concept of *effet injure* (Larguèche, 1983). She shows that words are not insulting *per se* but become insults if they are received as such and have an insulting effect. The first aspect that is striking in the parallel of LOL and *LLL* is that the two worlds cultivate what the princess calls "mockery merriment" (5.2.139).[2] From the beginning of the play two characters are designated as the boy's club's butts: Armado and Costard. In the austere "Academe" that they imagine, "Costard the swain" and Armado "shall be [their] sport" which will make their three years of abstinence and study seem "short" (1.1.177-178). In the "mortif[ying]" (1.1.28) life that they are planning to have, some "quick recreation" will be granted (1.1.159). Using people as a source of collective sport: here is what the four men agree on at the beginning of the play. Armado will provide "interim" to the men's "studies" (1.1.169); he will be "used" for the king's "minstrelsy" (1.1.174). This is what the LOL league was based on: collective mockery that newspapers defined as moral harassment, to serve their personal plans and ambitions and disqualify the other as being out of place. The two characters, Armado and Costard, both coming from a lower social class, become "laughing stocks to other men's humours", to quote Sir Hugh Evans in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (3.1.76-77).[3] Longaville is identified from the start by the Princess as "some merry mocking lord" (2.1.52) in a sequence that relates wit to mocking and describes it as a blot to virtue:

> The only soil of his fair virtue's gloss,
> […]
> Is a sharp wit matched with too blunt a will,
> Whose edge hath power to cut, whose will still wills
> It should none spare that come within his power. (2.1.47-51).

Dumaine is known for his wit (2.1.59), Berowne for his "mirth-moving jest[s]" (2.1.71). Wit is thus presented as both sharp and seductive. The princess then speculates on this link between mockery and wit through the aphorism "good wits will be jangling" (2.1.221) and by referring to a "civil war of wits" (2.1.222). If the battle of wits in *LLL* is balanced between the men and

women, the characters rendering “mock for mock” (5.2.140), things are not balanced between the nobility and the lower status characters who ironically embody the Nine Worthies in the play within the play. As expressed by the princess, mocking is a matter of power. And this is what very strikingly appears in the Pageant of the Nine Worthies. What the lords do to and with the amateur actors at the end of the play can be compared to public bashing, collective humiliation, which Holofernes describes as such when he declares: “This is not generous, not gentle, not humble” (5.2.614) in a sequence that can be very moving on stage. Contrary to the exchanges that the princess defines as “a set of wit well played” (5.2.29), the exchanges between the audience and the actors show how what is supposed to be mere jesting may hurt. Boyet, called by Berowne “old mocker” (5.2.540), is part of the chorus of railing and mocking that the Pageant triggers off. The mocking effect is formulated by the unworthy Worthies. Costard leaves the stage by commenting on his performance: “‘Tis not so much worth, but I hope I was perfect. I made a little fault in ‘Great’” (5.2.549-550), a comment that reveals how the audience have destabilized the character-actor. The Princess notes that Nathaniel, playing the part of the conquering Alexander, is “dismayed” (5.2.557), while Costard becoming part of the audience describes him as “soon dashed” (5.2.569) and “a little o’erparted” (5.2.571). Nathaniel’s dismay may come from the unsettling intervention of the audience who comment on his inappropriate nose. Dumaine uses the pun on Judas and ass to “shame” (5.2.588) Holofernes. The constant interruptions of the spectacle lead Armado to ask Longaville to “rein [his] tongue” (5.2.541) and the princess to “bestow on [him] the sense of hearing” (5.2.646-647) in a passage where Armado asks for the lord’s indulgence: “beat not the bones of the buried. When he breathed, he was a man” (5.2.644-645). The “quick recreation” announced at the beginning of the play takes on all its meaning when Costard and Armado’s strife about Jaquenetta emerges on stage, Costard “infamonis[ing]” Armado “among the potentates” by mentioning Jaquenetta “that is quick by him” (5.2.659-61). The transportation of elements of privacy onto the stage creates a moment of unease which only Marcadé’s arrival will stop. Beyond Pompey and Hector, it is Costard and Armado who become the butts of collective scorn. The merriment that Marcadé is interrupting is a cruel, mockery “merriment” (5.2.692), a shaming moment when characters lose face.

***LLL* as a face book**

LLL is the play in which there are the most numerous occurrences (26) of the word "face". What happens on social networks when you are a target of collective public abuse is that you lose (your) face. In his book *Impoliteness. Using Language to Cause Offence*, Jonathan Culpeper draws a link between face and offense in a chapter that shows that "Notions such as reputation, prestige and self-esteem, all involve an element of face". He notes that "In English, the term is perhaps most commonly used in the idiom 'losing face', meaning that one's public image suffers from damage, often resulting in emotional reactions, such as embarrassment." (Culpeper: 24). For Culpeper, losing face means that one's public image suffers from damage and this creates an emotional reaction of embarrassment (Culpeper: 24). "The point is that how you feel about your 'self' is dependent on how *others* assume about you" (Culpeper: 25). Face meets fame, "fame" which is the second word of *LLL* in a passage that refers to their "brazen tombs" (1.1.2), which may mean "shameless" tombs. Yet, as Ewan Fernie has noted in his book *Shame in Shakespeare*, the lords feel shame in the play, especially when they are exposed to one another's eye in what Fernie calls the "shaming sequence" in 4.3.[4] Shakespeare dramatizes their "Sweet fellowship in shame" (4.3.41) in an eavesdropping scene that is based on "hiding and exposure" (Fernie: 228).

Fernie notes that the word "shame" may be deriving from pre-Teutonic "skem", a variant of "kem", which means "cover". Hence the insistence on the motif of the faceless face, the visors that the lords wear when they approach the ladies as Muscovites, which can be a "sign of shame" (Fernie: 90). After this episode, the princess predicts that the four "woodcocks" will "hang themselves tonight", "Or ever but in vizards show their faces" (5.2.270-271). It is in this context that the final Pageant must be read. It is as if the lords were compensating for the shame they have felt by inflicting shame to the actors on stage. Having themselves become "shame-proof" (5.2.507), having themselves lost face, they are happy to find external targets for their mockery. This clearly appears in the following exchange:

> King: Berowne, they will shame us. Let them not approach.
> Berowne: We are shame-proof, my lord; and 'tis some policy
> To have one show worse than the king's and his company. (5.2.506-508).

The text regularly insists on the motif of the face, from the very beginning of the play when Jaquenetta expresses her skepticism to Armado who claims he will tell her "wonders" by

exclaiming: "With that face?" (1.2.113-114), to Boyet's referring to Navarre's "face's own margin" (2.1.242) which is like a book that betrays his love, to the shaming sequence when the King notes how his fellowmen "did blush" (4.3.130). It is in the final sequences of act 5 that the face is most emphasized, precisely because the characters lose face, one after the other. First the Muscovites are unmasked, which leads to the women's mockery expressed in Berowne's words:

> Can any face of brass hold longer out?
> Here stand I, lady; dart thy skill at me.
> Bruise me with scorn, confound me with a flout,
> Thrust thy sharp wit quite through my ignorance,
> Cut me to pieces with thy keen conceit, (5.2.395-399).

The battle with the ladies leaves the men, especially Berowne, "out of countenance quite" (5.2.272). According to Boyet, the Lords will never "digest this harsh indignity" (5.2.289), they are "lame with blows" (5.2.292), an expression that clearly shows the effect of mockery and points to what Judith Butler calls "linguistic vulnerability" in *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (1997). As Boyet says:

> The tongues of mocking wenches are as keen
> As is the razor's edge invisible,
> […] Their conceits have wings
> Fleeter than arrows, bullets, wind, thought, swifter things. (5.2.256-261)

The Lords are "dry-beaten with pure scoff" (5.2.263). Thus mockery leads to losing face and losing the fame Navarre was aiming at in the opening lines of the play. After these two shaming sequences, the eavesdropping scene and the Muscovites' scene, the Pageant of the Nine Worthies, with its defects, is an easy target for the lords to restore their self-image. The actors' distress is expressed in terms of faces too, especially in the following exchange between Holofernes and the Lords:

> Holofernes: I will not be put out of countenance.
> Berowne: Because thou hast no face.
> Holofernes: What is this?
> Boyet: A cittern-head.

Dumaine: The head of a bodkin.
Berowne: A death's face in a ring.
Longaville: The face of an old Roman coin, scarce seen.
Boyet: The pommel of Caesar's falchion.
Dumaine: The carved-bone face on a flask.
Berowne: Saint George's half-cheek in a brooch.
Dumaine: Ay, and in a brooch of lead.
Berowne: Ay, and worn in the cap of a tooth-drawer. And now forward, for we have put thee in countenance.
Holofernes: You have put me out of countenance.
Berowne: False. We have given thee faces.
Holofernes: But you have outfaced them all. (5.2.592-608)

Face and offense are here tightly connected and we attend Holofernes's ironic loss of face as he is given too many faces. Mocking has the power to outface, that is to destroy the face, the name, the fame of the character. And outfacing the character means silencing him, as he then disappears after having just delivered a few words, like Moth who declares a little earlier that the ladies "Do not mark [him], and that brings [him] out" (5.2.173). A lot of faces get lost in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Even Armado who is said to "make faces" (5.2.626) while playing Hector loses his during a moment of merriment that illustrates the dark side of laughter.

"Stabbed with laughter"

While attending the fiasco of the episode of the Muscovites, Boyet exclaims: "O, I am stabbed with laughter!" (5.2.80). Here he expresses the mocker's point of view who is dying of laughter. But the mocker's words here may ironically point to the damaging power laughter can have on the other. The end of the story theorizes on the good and the bad side of laughter and delineates a kind of ethics of laughter.

In her book *Shakespeare and Laughter. A Cultural History*, Indira Ghose includes a section on laughter in *LLL*, in a chapter entitled "Courtliness and Laughter" (Ghose: 15-51). She rightly notes that "the characters are not only mocked by exposing their linguistic extravagance. They are further deflated by means of the formalized, stylized structure of the plot. Every scene with the courtiers is mirrored by parallel scenes with the subplot characters." (Ghose: 37). She mentions the "harassing" of the Worthies and notes that in 5.2 "The hostility between members of the elite is now deflected to scapegoat figures from the lower ranks of

society" (Ghose: 41), a phenomenon that seems to perfectly reflect what can happen nowadays on social networks. In this play, she notes, it is the ladies who have "the upper hand" (Ghose: 41). The battle is not as balanced as the mathematical distribution of parts seems to suggest. Thus it is not fortuitous that it should be the women who at the end write new rules for the men. And these new rules are based on a good usage of laughter which should generate "pleasure and not aggression" (Ghose: 43).

The end of the play tells us that laughter should no longer be "an instrument to exclude outsiders through mockery" (Ghose: 47). The Princess gives the men and our contemporaries a lesson in laughter, formulating what Indira Ghose has termed, in another essay, an "ethics of laughter" (Ghose 2014). Mocking is identified at the end of the play as a mortifying speech act while it should be restorative and re-creative. In her article on "Shakespeare and the Ethics of Laughter", Indira Ghose notes that there is a "darker side to laughter" (Ghose 2014: 56) and that "in the Renaissance, laughter continued to be equated with mockery" (Ghose 2014: 65). She quotes a passage from the *Traité du Ris* (*Treatise on Laughter*) by Laurent Joubert (1579) which, she notes, "recycles Aristotle's definition of the ridiculous". Joubert writes that "What we see that is ugly, deformed, improper, indecent, unfitting and indecorous excites laughter in us, provided we are not moved to compassion" (Joubert 1980: 20 apud Ghose 2014: 65),[5] emphasizing the gap or tension between laughter and compassion. Ghose distinguishes benevolent from malevolent laughter, noting that Shak "repeatedly calls the practice of humiliation through laughter into question" (Ghose 2014: 65-66).

Rosaline at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost* puts into question the practice of jesting. If the Nine Worthies, and especially Costard and Armado have been the Lords' sport, the Lords' love has also been a sport for the ladies, as appears when the Princess says they "met (their) loves/ In their own fashion, like a merriment" (5.2.758). Rosaline wants to come back to a benevolent use of jesting:

> Rosaline: Oft have I heard of you, my Lord Berowne,
> Before I saw you, and the world's large tongue
> Proclaims you for a man replete with mocks,
> Full of comparisons and wounding flouts,
> Which you on all estates will execute
> That lie within the mercy of your wit.
> […]

to win me, if you please,
[…]
You shall this twelvemonth term from day to day
Visit the speechless sick and still converse
With groaning wretches; and your task shall be,
With all the fierce endeavor of your wit
To enforce the pained impotent to smile.
Berowne: To move wild laughter in the throat of death?
It cannot be, it is impossible:
Mirth cannot move a soul in agony.
Rosaline: Why, that's the way to choke a gibing spirit,
Whose influence is begot of that loose grace
Which shallow laughing hearers give to fools.
A jest's prosperity lies in the ear
Of him that hears it, never in the tongue
Of him that makes it. Then, if sickly ears,
Deafed with the clamours of their own dear groans,
Will hear your idle scorns, continue then,
And I will have you and that fault withal;
But if they will not, throw away that spirit,
And I shall find you empty of that fault,
Right joyful of your reformation. (5.2.809-837)

The end of the play tells us that laughter or mirth making[6] should no longer be "an instrument to exclude outsiders through mockery" (Ghose: 47). Rosaline at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost* advocates a benevolent use of jesting, when she asks Berowne to put his sharp wit to the service of "the speechless sick" (5.2.819). In fact, by excluding what Ghose calls "derisive and punitive laughter" (Ghose 2014: 66), she reformulates what Holofernes expressed in simple words: be "generous", "gentle", "humble" (5.2.614).

Making faces, blushing, laughing: you can read crisis in the book of faces. We hope that this quick paper has shown how relevant *LLL* is to understand a culture of LOL. Collective abuse, jesting that turns into insults, the exposure of one's private life, the traumatic experience of offensive words, the malevolent effect of laughter, all these facets that are present in *LLL* speak to us nowadays. This comedy shows that behind a wonderful façade, behind Navarre, the "wonder of the world" (1.1.11), there is a mortifying use of the tongue which disfigures and

defaces. No wonder the play should end on the song of the owl and the cuckoo, two birds that are associated with ill omen and mockery:

> The cuckoo then on every tree
> Mocks married men; for thus sings he:
> "Cuckoo
> "Cuckoo, cuckoo! O word of fear
> Unpleasing to a married ear. (5.2.863-8§7)

"Tu Whit, to who", "Tu Whit, to who" (5.2.883; 892): to quote the last words of the play, the words of Mercury, the messenger, the "twitter", are harsh indeed. It's up to us and the world of Navarre to make them more "gentle".

Works Cited

Austin, J. L. (1962), *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford, Oxford UP.

Bulman, James C. (ed.) (2016), William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part 2*, Arden, London and New York, Bloomsbury.

Butler, Judith (1997), *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*, New York, Routledge.

Carroll, William C. (ed.) (2009), William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.

Culpeper, Jonathan (2011), *Impoliteness. Using Language to Cause Offence*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.

Fernie, Ewan (2002), *Shame in Shakespeare*, London and New York, Routledge.

Ghose, Indira (2008), *Shakespeare and Laughter. A Cultural History*, Manchester, Manchester UP.

_ _ (2014), "Shakespeare and the Ethics of Laughter", in Patrick Gray and John D. Cox (ed.), *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, pp. 56-75.

Holcomb, Chris (2001), *The Rhetorical Discourse on Jesting in Early Modern England*, Columbia, U of South Carolina P.

Joubert, Laurent (1579), *Traité du ris, contenant son essance, ses causes, et mervelheus effais*, *[…]*, Paris. http://www.bium.univ-paris5.fr/histmed/medica/cote?32084, accessed 8 August 2019.

_ _, Laurent (1980), *Treatise on Laughter*, ed. and trans. by Gregory David de Rocher, Alabama, U of Tuscaloosa P.

Kingsley-Smith, Jane (2014), "Aristotelian Shame and Christian mortification in *Love's Labour's Lost*", in Patrick Gray and John D. Cox (ed.), *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, pp. 76-97.

Larguèche, Évelyne (1983), *L'effet Injure*, Paris, PUF.

Melchiori, Giorgio (ed.) (2000), William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Arden, 2000.

[1] James C. Bulman (ed.), *King Henry IV Part 2*, Arden, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2016.

[2] All references are to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. William C. Carroll, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2009.
[3] *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori, Arden, 2000.
[4] On shame in *Love's Labour's Lost*, see also Jane Kingsley-Smith, "Aristotelian Shame and Christian Mortification in *Love's Labour's Lost*", in Patrick Gray and John D. Cox (ed.), *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 76-97.
[5] Laurent Joubert, *Traité du Ris*, Paris, 1579, p. 16: "Ce que nous voyons de laid, difforme, des-honneste, indessant, mal-seant, & peu convenable, excite an nous le ris, pourveu que nous n'an soyons meus à compassion."
[6] On the early modern culture of jesting, see Chris Holcomb, *The Rhetorical Discourse on Jesting in Early Modern England*, Columbia, SC, U of South Carolina P, 2001.