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Love's Labours Wonne

Allison Hischke
Grand Valley State University

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Love's Labours Wonne

Allison Hischke
Grand Valley State University
19 April 2011

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Preface

My first encounter with *Love's Labour's Lost* came during my Shakespeare 313 class. We were each required to choose a play to read and present to our class and I selected a play I knew the Royal Shakespeare Company had recently produced. For me, the play is equal parts lovely, silly, and troublesome. It is a play about words: their power, their meaning, and the ways we play with them. I find the language to be even more difficult, the references even more obscure, than many of Shakespeare's other plays, meaning that the very details which make the play so delightful can also make it a challenge.

The play has stayed with me however; its chatty characters and, most relevantly, its abrupt ending. Berowne remarks near the play's end that "our wooing doth not end like an old play." There is no sign of the quadruple wedding promised by the play's classification as a comedy. The story's end is really more of a beginning. The forsworn lords are sworn to new oaths and are set to begin a year long pursuit of them. Whether they succeed or not is an ending we are not granted. While there are some who believe that this is the experience Shakespeare intended, I have always found the prospect of *Love's Labours Wonne* much more interesting.

This is the fabled lost play whose title appears in lists of Shakespeare's plays but whose text has never been recovered. The possibility of its existence has intrigued scholars some time and that same possibility intrigued me as well. It seemed obvious to

me that these characters were meant to have a conclusion to their story and, in the absence of any official word, I resolved to write it myself.

I am not Shakespeare. This is fairly obvious and yet it was something I had to repeat to myself at regular intervals throughout the writing process. As excited as I was about the project, I was very hesitant to actually begin writing. These were after all *Shakespeare's* characters. What business did I have picking them up and moving them around? In the end, the only thing to do was set my work a respectful distance from the original before I began.

My version of *Love's Labours Wonne* is written in prose simply because it is the style I am most comfortable in. My feeling was that if I tried too hard to be Shakespearean, I would fail miserably. Therefore, the five act structure is preserved, but chapters take the place of scenes. I slip wordplay into the dialogue whenever it feels natural to me, but I do not attempt to make each line clever and quotable. The language is certainly not modern, but I avoided 'thee's and 'thou's as much as I could. The result, I feel, is a novelette which honors its inspiration, but is still very much my own.

One area where I did try to imitate the work Shakespeare had done was in the characters themselves. I spent weeks researching various interpretations of the text and the characters that inhabit it. My copy of Hugh Richmond's "Shakespeare's Navarre" is a solid block of pink highlighting. I took pages of notes about the real life people who may or may not have inspired the characters and eventually I had to stop. My advisor suggested that the original play was the most important text to consider and I began to realize that after repeated readings of *Love's Labour's Lost*, I already knew who the characters were. I didn't need scholarly interpretation to tell me how they would behave

or what their histories were. There are no doubt some deviations from the original (I still have difficulty distinguishing between Shakespeare's Longaville and Dumaine for example, and needed to give them more distinct personalities in my sequel) but I learned to trust my instincts and treat the characters as my own.

Once I finally put down the research and picked up my pen, other problems began to arise. I struggled with the sheer number of characters in the play and the amount of time *Love's Labours Wonne* was meant to cover (there was a reason Berowne declared it "too long for a play"). It was a delicate balance of asking "What would Shakespeare do?" but not forgetting that "What am I capable of doing?" was a pretty significant factor as well. In the end I dropped a few characters. Holofernes, Nathaniel, Dull, and Boyet all have their places in *Love's Labour's Lost*, but I was unable to manage all of them and Armado, Moth, and Jaquenetta represent all of the lower class characters in *Love's Labours Wonne*. I worked hard to give equal time to all of the lords and ladies without seeming to bounce too quickly from one scene to the next in the short space I had to work with. I doubt I handled it as gracefully as Shakespeare, but I definitely did the best I could.

There were times when I thought this project would never be finished. It certainly took longer than I expected it would. I agonized over dialogue, deleted whole scenes, and stared so long at my words that I could no longer tell if they made any sense. In the end, however, *Love's Labours Wonne* has proved to be a very satisfying project. It began as a challenge, one somewhat outside my comfort zone, and culminated in a piece of writing that I am very proud of.

❧ Love's Labours Wonne ❧

Act I Scene I

A solemn departure ended the day. The shadows of twilight fell across the grounds of Navarre while the king and his compatriots stood and watched their women of France take their leave. The new Queen trimmed herself and her company in black, ribbons standing out starkly against the garments of royal state and frivolity, and not a one glanced over her shoulder as the cheerless party vacated the lawns.

“The death of one man makes bachelors of four,” remarked the King. “He goes to rest and we to penance.”

“Aye and no sinner was ever sentenced so long as we. A year and a day hence to prove our love? It is too hard.”

With a nod to Longaville, Dumaine observed the actors dismantling their show as Armado removed himself with haste from the grounds, “Even the Spaniard’s wooing comes to more success than ours. We should all go woolward and pursue such light wenches.”

Three men grumbled and kicked at stones, a moment before happy slaves to love and now already tiring under the burden it. Berowne stood to the side, listening with only half an ear, pensively considering the words of Rosaline who had so keenly and with so quick a tongue wounded him. Her censure of his person was so complete that he was taken off guard. In fact, the entire proceeding from wooing to mocking to dismissal had turned him about like a whirlwind. It scarcely seemed possible that only a matter of days before, Berowne and the others were swearing an oath to austerity and pursuits of the

mind. Then, somehow forgotten in the haste to pursue intellectual fame, had come the Princess of France along with her ladies and her claim to disputed lands.

Their sweet smiles and appealing looks had proven so great a temptation that each lord had thrown aside his oath and rushed to woo his chosen love. Berowne still did not know whether to feel satisfied that he was right in his prediction that they would all be forsworn or ashamed that it had happened so quickly. It certainly had not impressed the girls of France. Berowne's clothes were still damp from the sweating he had done when he slowly began to realize that the women saw through the "clever" disguises of him and his friends. That they had had to sit through that ridiculous pageant of the Nine Worthies afterward had not helped his temper and he was only now becoming reasonable enough to regret the mocking they had given the poor actors. News of the King of France's death had brought to an abrupt end the disastrous productions of both sets of performers and it was almost with relief that they had turned their attention to this more serious matter.

And now, after all of it, they were all sworn again. Longaville, Dumaine, Ferdinand and Berowne each assigned by his lady a year's test to prove his love.

"Our taskers face no smaller hardship than we," Berowne said, interrupting the complaints. "Grief will weigh as heavily in the hearts of our fair women of France as our oaths weigh in ours. The two of you," he nodded to Dumaine and Longaville, "have only to wait and a wait may only be as long as the waiter chooses to make it."

"True," replied Longaville. "And this waiter chooses to serve his own turn by waiting as little as possible. I shall play at books and study at life and so prove a fuller man when next I meet dear Maria."

“And we, Berowne?” asked the King. “How will the year treat the two of us? Our labor is harsher than a year’s impatient wait. I am sent to a lonely hermitage, there to take no pleasant society and pass the months in such a peasant manner as ill befits a King.”

Ferdinand grumbled and crossed his arms as he spoke, caught again in a difficult oath and this one not of his devising. No fame or lasting tales would ever belong to a hermit. Kings would scoff at such a lowly state willingly submitted to and lovers dismiss his quiet wait in favor of more valiant men who poetically slew armies for their love.

“And you, your grace?” responded Berowne with a laugh. “Your oath hardly binds you to more than our friends. Solitary hours may prove just the opportunity for pursuing the terms of your previous oath, so recently made and broken. Or simply break this oath as you did the last and escape all hardship. Only do not complain about your exile when my banishment is the worst of all.”

His claim was met with derision and protests from his comrades, insisting with enthusiasm that it was certainly Berowne whose quest was the easiest.

“I am sure your wit will not be slowed for want of an encouraging audience,” said Ferdinand with a smile.

Dumaine was in agreement, “He may even return to us with an enhanced smirk for succeeding where others bid him to fail.”

“Punishment indeed to labor at what comes naturally,” echoed Longaville. “And he will call his the most ardent task? A very fine joke!”

“I say it is the hardest,” Berowne repeated, hardly believing that a year spent in an hospital could ever be considered an experience of leisure. “But I will not squabble with

you now. The hours drain away and we must use this time to prepare. Tomorrow our oaths begin and, whatever you decide, sirs, I will undertake mine to whatever end.

“And the rest of us as well,” spoke Ferdinand. “We will prove our oaths sound, though sworn in haste. Our honor is heightened even in undertaking a lesser pledge.”

In the encroaching dark, the nobles renewed their oaths. Each would labor at his ordered task and not one was to return if, before a year had passed, they broke the conditions of their oath. As the Queen had commanded, Ferdinand resolved to go to the wild of the country, making an austere and silent retreat of a place where he had before passed many a day in indulgence and engaging society. There he meant to honestly pursue the terms of his previously broken oath and study the works of the masters. There would he till the earth and wear plain clothes and from there would he return, worthier to seek in marriage the white hand of that truly graceful Queen.

Contrarily, there was too much of society and the world meant for Berowne. He would haunt the halls of the hospital, endeavoring to provoke a smile from the lips of the sick and dying. The challenge that Rosaline had issued him was a fool’s errand, one that suited him well. And though he stubbornly assumed he would emerge unscathed, Berowne had to admit that a certain dread was present in the back of his mind.

The others would wait, bid by the ladies Maria and Katherine only to suffer the pains of longing and separation. Both Longaville and Dumaine declared that they too would take up the old mantle of study and fasting, but, pledge-weary, neither swore to it.

Ordering that provisions be made, the King instructed that his servants were to work throughout the night preparing for a journey that was to begin at dawn. “And so I bid you good night, gentlemen,” he said. “Tomorrow will begin the test of all our mettle.”

He swept away, followed closely by two of his book-mates and leaving the third standing alone on the lawn.

Berowne watched them go until they passed behind a line of trees and were hidden from view. Once alone, he turned and stared toward the far reaches of the palace grounds where they met the growing blackness of the sky and beyond which the world lay waiting. He stared without seeing, folding his arms close against the whisper of cold and sighed.

His thoughts were of pestilence, of plague, and of groans and final breaths, weeping and death. And laughter. He had sworn to make these coexist and yet did not see how it could be done. Twice in hardly more days, Berowne had pledged himself to an impossible oath. He expected to fail, did not see how it could be otherwise, and was already stealing his pride not to be wounded when it happened. Unlike his King, however, who had been so single-minded and short-sighted when trapping his friends in an oath, Berowne suspected that his second tasker anticipated clearly that failure was the most likely outcome.

Rosaline's haughty smile when she banished him nearly eclipsed the softness of her dark eyes in his mind. He and his fellows had been fools truly, but shouldn't fools in love be granted forgiveness for their temporary madness? Apparently not. Soundly mocked, the fools were dismissed rather than embraced. Berowne could not quite bring himself to say aloud what inwardly he almost considered as fact. That the French woman meant for him to fail. She gave her promise to wed with no intention of seeing him again when twelve months had passed. Instead she would be free, he forsworn again and mocked or forgotten.

It was this certainty of Rosaline's cruel intentions which strengthened Berowne's resolve for the unreasonable request. He would go, he would jest, and he would prevail. At the end of a year, he would travel to France a true, honorable, and proven man. There he would meet Rosaline and challenge her promise. Whether she consented or chose instead to break her oath, Berowne would feel vindicated.

Though if he was going to be honest, he might as well admit that he would prefer a wedding.

Act I Scene II

The next morning, the entire palace rose before the sun. An impressive breakfast had been ordered and spread on the long table in the dining hall. Under the vaulted ceiling, King Ferdinand held court for the last time in a long while and made everyone aware what a significant event was beginning and how many hardships he was soon to endure.

“But you, my friends,” he said to Longaville and Dumaine. “Should retain your usual rooms, routines, and privileges. My staff has been informed. Your every need is to be attended to until I return. Just because some of us must give up our comforts does not mean that we all should.”

“I thank you, my lord.”

“And I thank you.”

“A toast,” said the King, holding his glass high. “To four bold ventures. That in a year’s time we may all be healthier, wiser, and well-wedded.”

“And well-bedded,” added Longaville, smirking as he clinked glasses with his neighbor.

“Hear hear!” Dumaine said, knocking back his drink enthusiastically and dribbling a few drops down his front.

Berowne sipped slowly, swallowing only a mouthful and setting his glass down gently, “Hear hear.”

They ate and drank heavily, far more than a usual breakfast warranted, with the knowledge that this was their last gathering. When at last he could eat no more, the King excused himself to change into more suitable rags for the coming months. Ferdinand had come to the meal in royal violet, dressed as finely as he had for any banquet and wearing the jeweled crown that he saved primarily for official functions. Removing these clothes and packing them away gave the King his first real shiver of the knowledge that the next year would be very different from any he had previously spent.

Slowly and with great care, Ferdinand dressed in the clothes he had sent for late the previous evening. Finer than the garments of any poor hermit, they were nonetheless plain. Dark brown and unornamented, the clothes hung from his solid frame in a way so unflattering the King wished he had time to send for his tailor. One could only hope they would itch less when he got used to the rough fabric.

Pulling on his hunting boots, Ferdinand consulted a mirror in the corner of the room. It was a disgrace, of course, for a ruler to be seen dressed in such a fashion. But voluntary debasement in this manner could only heighten respect for his person.

“Never let it be said that the King of Navarre goes back on his word,” he said to his reflection, tugging at the clothing.

He patted his cheeks, wondering if he should have shaved and decided that the rags suited him. His jaw was still strong, his eyes still blue and bright, his dark hair still free of gray. He looked rugged, formidable. He wondered how he would look with a full hermit’s beard and whether it would be a violation of his oath to remove it if it was unbecoming. He decided it wasn’t. After all it couldn’t be that all hermits were unkempt. Wild. Of course not.

More than that, Ferdinand was sure that the Queen did not mean for him to succumb to the animal tendencies like so many men of the woods. Her commands were surely more intended as a favor than a punishment. For, while she mourned the old king of France, no wedding could take place. And a year of grief was such a long time, he might grow restless and anxious with waiting, so his lady had prescribed the remedy. The King would gain the withdrawal from society he had desired only a few days prior. He could study, he could fast, and he could count on no interruptions. Abandoning the previous night's fears of being scorned or ignored, Ferdinand reasoned that even the most dedicated of scholars were eclipsed in stories by patient lovers. Being both, he must be the greatest of them all.

He descended the stairs and returned to the hall, back straight, walking proudly and was greeted exactly as he had hoped. His servants "oohed" at his changed appearance. His friends laughed and clapped him on the back and declared he looked the part as well as any hermit they ever saw.

"You see, I set the example for us all," he declared, holding his hands out to the side and doing a turn that everyone might admire him fully. "These rags are my badge of honor; my willing humility is my pride. I charge you all to undertake your quests so thoroughly as I have mine."

Sitting alone at the table, Berowne tipped his head back and swallowed what was left in his glass. He set it down beside his plate, more covered than not with the remains of the meal, and at last rose to his feet. "Gentlemen," he said. "The sun is rising and we had best be on our way. The sheep, I believe, are waiting to praise our King's fine dress."

Ferdinand had hoped for perhaps another small serving from their plentiful meal, but he must not appear to be any less eager than his fellows. He had ordered a succulent lunch packed for the journey anyway, meats and cheeses and the like. After all, he was not yet a hermit if he still road in a carriage and could eat as he chose.

“Berowne is right,” the King said. “It is time we leave our comfort aside for these twelve months in pursuit of greater life. Prepare the horses!”

Ferdinand was to travel in a train of two. He would ride in his finest carriage, carrying his clothes and his most personal possessions and, of course, his lunch. The second would carry his books, entertainments, and the little necessities he couldn’t do without. The first coach would of course return to the palace; he would have no business driving it. However, the second, plainer one, he had decided he could keep. One never knew when transportation would be required.

For the first leg of their journey, Berowne would travel with him. Just before midday, the men would part. Ferdinand toward the country and Berowne on the road to Navarre’s capital city. Though sworn to no hardship, the younger man brought only one trunk carrying all his possessions. His shabby carriage would return to the palace along with the driver and the footman, leaving him with no helpful hands in the large city.

“You have everything?” the King asked as they walked to their carriages.

“I believe so.”

“Books?”

“A few. I doubt I’ll have much time for study.”

“You should always have more than enough books. What about entertainment? Music perhaps?”

Berowne smiled, "If I have time for it, I dare say the city will provide entertainment enough. We have not all been sentenced to solitude."

The King protested, beginning to say he had an instrument that Berowne could use (it needed new strings but those were easy enough to come by) which would only take a few minutes to fetch and Berowne laughed.

"Come then. You find fault with my preparation because you are not ready to leave. Like a schoolboy who would forget his book, his shoes or his shirt to stay away from toil a moment longer."

The King smiled back, "Do you think I shall be able to beat the hermit's life into me like they do the Latin?"

"We'll never know unless we depart. You may turn truant or teacher's pet; it's yours to decide."

"Then we had best be on our way."

"Your majesty! Good sirs! I pray you stay your horses a moment longer!"

The breathless voice came at first from no where and then was located, coming up quick across the lawn.

"I believe it is our besotted Spanish friend."

"I believe you're right."

Don Adriano de Armado hurried, pink-cheeked, toward them, doing his best to rush and not appear to be rushing. Behind him the ever-quick Moth followed, his shorter stride nearly forcing him to run. They presented a comical sight; Armado keeping one hand atop his head to keep his hat in place and Moth running behind in imitation of his master, though he had no hat to hold.

“Gentlemen!” Armado skidded to a halt in front of the two nobles, straightening his hat then his jacket while trying to catch his breath.

“Slowly, Don Armado,” said the King. “You’re flushed. You gasp. You’ll grow faint.”

“He’s heard that before,” said Berowne. “But never while wearing a hat.”

“I come to tell you-” Armado sucked in a breath and then began again. “I came to see you off. As I am now pledged to Jaquenetta we are brothers in oath-hood.”

“If we be brothers, then surely our fathers wore horns,” Berowne muttered to himself, hiding his smirk so that Armado was uncertain whether to laugh uneasily or ignore the jest.

Pausing to recover his train of thought, Armado continued, “But I must apologize that I have abandoned my promise to your majesty. For surely you will require entertainment now more than before. Were I not so imprisoned; that is to say, bonded; that is to say, in love with Jaquenetta, I would accompany you. But I am sworn otherwise.”

“So you have said. “Sworn to hold the plough” for three years, I believe,” said the King as Armado nodded. “Then be true to your word. Love shall hold the whip over all else and you are released from your promise.”

“And now we are on our way, sir,” Berowne said, stepping toward his coach. “Unless the penitent don Adriano has any further sins to confess?”

“None, sir! My conscience is now clear. Clear as they eye of my beloved. Itself as clear as-”

“Adieu!” cried Berowne. “Adieu and adios and may our paths cross again.”

He climbed into the vehicle and after taking a slightly more gracious leave of his comrades, the king alighted into his own carriage and they at last departed. The others duly kept watch until their train was out of sight.

“Much-admired gentlemen,” sighed Armado. “To labor such for love.”

“Much-loving gentlemen,” said Moth. “With such large hearts for so much loving.”

“Prettily said, boy. Much-loving are we, they and I as well. Very pretty. Come, we will to our way.”

“Not you as well, my lord,” said Moth, obediently beginning to walk.

“What? And why not I? I love Jaquenetta. I am pledged to her. My heart is full. Why am I not also ‘much-loving gentleman’?”

“The king and his mates love the ladies of France. So also do they love love and its pursuits.”

“So too do I love,” Armado protested, refraining from the undignified reaction of stamping his foot or throttling his page.

“And they love also,” Moth continued, ignoring his master’s displeasure. “A dance, a feast, a game, hard study, fame, and themselves. They love much and therefore, much-loving. Your love for the wench is singular and therefore you, much less loving.”

“Put in these terms to be much less is much more agreeable,” said Armado, pleased to grinning. “Well said.”

He led them on their way with a proud step to his walk. Moth followed behind, pleased with his thoughts and his articulation of them. Soon after an addendum occurred to him and he mused to himself, “With the noble gentlemen loving so much, one wonders

how they may give much love to one love. With their fervent loyalty to so many oaths,
one wonders how they will be loyal, in the end, to one.”

Act II Scene I

With the departure of the King and Berowne, Longaville and Dumaine were at a loss. They were at first glad of the time and the use of the palace to spend the terms of their sentences. There were dozens of servants at their disposal and dozens of diversions waiting to be commanded. So many options presented themselves that none at all would suffice. Suddenly twelve months unfolded themselves in front of the lords' eyes, days and minutes stretching like miles over the full course of a year that all at once seemed very long indeed.

"I did swear to study," Dumaine said hesitantly as the two men stood in the now empty courtyard.

"You planned to study," corrected Longaville. "You did not swear to it. We swore only to the waiting not to the means of it."

Dumaine brightened, "You're right. The means of waiting may be any we choose."

"Right."

"What shall we choose?"

"Well, whatever seems to us to be the best. At any particular time. Anything really."

"Right."

Both men fell silent for a moment, enjoying the contemplations of their freedom. In the courtyard as the sun rose, birds chirped and a handful of servants hurried through

their chores. Longaville raised his arms and stretched deeply, yawning so intensely that it looked as though his jaw might come unhinged. Dumaine scratched his ear and twitched his lips as he waited for something to occur to him.

“It is...”

“Yes?” said Dumaine, dropping his hand and early turning at his companion’s words.

“What?”

“You were saying something.”

“Was I?”

“I thought so.”

“You might have been mistaken.”

“Well. I’m sorry.”

“It isn’t a problem,” Longaville assured him. After a moment he said, “Oh. Well.”

“Well?” pressed Dumaine.

“Well I might have said something.”

“Just now?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“Nothing. Nothing of importance. Only that, well.”

Dumaine waited and then urged, “Well?”

“Well it is quite early isn’t it?”

Looking around as if to find the evidence to verify the earliness of the hour, Dumaine nodded, “You’re right. It is early. Was that all you were saying?”

“It’s much earlier than I am accustomed to rising.”

“Oh? Oh.”

“Do you not find that it’s the same for you?”

“Oh yes,” nodded Dumaine. “Much earlier than my custom. It is early. Almost too early to undertake any of the events of the day.”

“Yes, that was my point exactly,” said Longaville. “If we were travelling that would be one thing.”

“Or working.”

“Or hunting or preparing for some thing or another but we are not.”

“We’re not.”

“No.”

Longaville paused and waited for Dumaine’s suggestion while Dumaine looked down then back up with a tight smile and then off over his shoulder as he waited for Longaville to suggest it.

Eventually he did, asking, “What do you think?”

“About it being early?”

“About how we should deal with it being early.”

“What do you think?”

“I think we should go to bed. Reconvene at a more suitable hour. Make our plans for the day then.”

“I agree completely. We ought to be resting.”

“I’m glad you agree. We’ll meet again at lunch then?”

“Certainly.”

The two men departed, each to his own chamber to wait until a more suitable hour to begin. They would not rise until several hours later, well after a suitable hour to rise and begin had passed, setting a precedent early for the many days to come.

Act II Scene II

The bumpy and dusty roads had so jostled and dirtied and upset Ferdinand that the King was almost unable to enjoy his noon meal. It would have been difficult to enjoy it anyway as the idiot kitchen girl had packed the bread at the bottom of the basket where it had been soundly flattened. As a further annoyance, the separation of his path from Berowne's had occurred sooner than he expected and Ferdinand was forced to consume his cold meats in the woods with no one for company but the envious and illiterate servants who had accompanied him.

Ferdinand was already beginning to tire and he didn't like to think what state he would be in when he at last made it to his lodge, deep within the woods. He had sent the coach with his belongings on ahead while he made his stop for lunch, so at least the place should be aired out and his pillows fluffed before he arrived.

"Sire?" The servant boy who spoke flushed visibly when Ferdinand looked up and stumbled over his words, "We are- That is, some of the men were saying that they expected rain later in the afternoon. If you don't- I was wondering if you might- If you thought we should leave here sooner rather than later? Your majesty."

Looking up through the dense treetops at the intense blue of the afternoon sky, the king laughed, "Not to worry... what was your name?"

"Thomas."

"Not to worry, Thomas. There's not a storm that's ever swept through this region that I've not felt long before it arrived. We'll have dry weather for our travels."

“Of course, sir.”

The boy’s anxiety made Ferdinand smile fondly at him. No doubt he was honored to be serving the King and worried about doing a poor job. He would likely do just fine. If he could stop shaking. “Here, Thomas,” the King said, tossing him an apple. “Keep your strength up. “We’ve a long way to travel yet.”

Unprepared for flying fruit, Thomas bobbed the apple but caught it before it hit the ground. Blushing, he bowed awkwardly and squeaked, “Yes, sire. Thank you, sire.” He scurried back to where the driver was seated against a tree, eating his own meager lunch and was good-naturedly ribbed for his nerves and for his ability to predict the weather.

Chuckling to himself, Ferdinand went back to his meal, intending to enjoy every last morsel before setting off again.

* * *

They arrived at the hunting lodge amidst rain that fell in sheets and thunder that made the usually well-behaved horses skitter and whinny in fear and protest. Pulling his own trunk out of the carriage, Ferdinand shouted above the wind, “Put them into the stables and get them something to eat. You’ll have to stay until this weather clears!”

As Thomas and the driver obeyed his order, the two servants who had been sent ahead hurried from the front door to assist him. “Be careful with that,” he said to the man who grabbed his trunk. “Don’t drop it.” The second man provided him with a cloak to put on against the rain. It was helpful, no doubt, in keeping the king from being completely drenched. Only mostly drenched, he hurried inside.

Just as he'd hoped, there was a fire roaring in the massive Great Room. He would take his evening meal there. There was no point in lighting the fire of the dining hall solely for himself. Ferdinand got the attention of the servant to have his cloak taken away again and asked, "Have my things been put away?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Good. And the horses?"

"I believe they are being taken care of."

"Make sure of it. Have we any food in the kitchen?"

"I'm not sure, my lord. I think there's none but what we've brought with us."

"Of course. Well, see what you can find. Prepare something substantial for yourselves as well and then you are dismissed. We will all make tonight an early one."

"Yes, my lord. I will, my lord."

With the help occupied, Ferdinand made his way alone up the dark stairs to his usual chambers. There was thankfully a candle burning within the room, though it provided even less light than the periodic lightning flashes that illuminated the entire space. His body reacted to the dim light immediately and the King could soon feel exhaustion in all of his muscles. Sleep pulled at his eyes and the sight of his freshly made bed called to him like a siren song.

Somehow Ferdinand resisted. He found his store of dry clothes and changed into some of them (if there was one thing to say for a poor man's clothes, it was that they were considerably easier to get in and out of). He hung the old garments to drip on the floor and as he did so he could see the two men who had secured the horses running back from the stables. If possible it seemed like the rain was falling even harder. No doubt it

would be hard going through muddy paths when they left in the morning and for the first time, the King felt glad he would not be returning to his palace.

He swept downstairs where he expected to find dinner and instead found his servants rushing around in a frenzy, trying to find anything that might be edible on the premises. At last the King was presented with a bruised apple and a stale piece of bread.

It was Ferdinand's instinct to recoil and demand to know what they meant by such fare and the expression of the man holding the plate said that he expected much the same. However, thinking sternly to himself "you are sworn to the life of a hermit, free of every luxury," Ferdinand forced a laugh. "This is the first of many such meals, I suppose," he said, taking the plate. "I thank you."

"You're welcome, sir."

Ferdinand lifted the apple, found it soft under his fingers and set it back down again. Wiping his hand on his shirt, he asked, "You didn't happen to find any ale around did you?"

He went to bed that evening with a growling stomach, an itch he couldn't scratch and a chill that he could not get out of his toes. His bed, which had always sufficed after long days on the hunt and long nights on the drink, did not seem as comfortable as he remembered. The thought of remaining in it for a year annoyed him. If this was the life of a hermit, it was no wonder so many of them were disagreeable persons.

Pulling the blanket up to his chin, the King stared at the dark ceiling and could not sleep even as the storm outside ebbed and blew away.

Act II Scene III

Rain had seeped through the unsealed door and windows of his carriage, dampening Berowne's spirits as well as his boots. He at least fared better than his driver who was wet to the bone and cold to shaking. They stopped at an inn in the city of Pamplona and secured lodgings for the night. It was a shabby place, but it was foolish to search for a better with the weather raging so. If his offer was accepted at the hospital, Berowne would search for more permanent lodgings anyway. For now, the roof did not leak, hot soup was plentiful in the kitchens, and the place would suffice.

Promising to have a hot meal sent up, Berowne left his servant shivering beneath a pile of blankets while his only pair of clothes hung to dry. Downstairs, the inn was quiet, with only a few travelers like himself who had been detained by the storm talking near the fire. Berowne took his soup from a plump and rosy cheeked, if slightly greasy, serving maid and paid an additional coin for her to take a bowl upstairs as well.

Suddenly ravenous, Berowne took a seat near the fire and made quick work of his meal. He had declined lunch with the King and breakfast was such a distant memory that the thin soup and the few bits of potatoes and meat in it were like a feast. He was so focused on his meal that Berowne did not even take notice of the curious glances directed his way by the other travelers until he had scraped clean the bowl.

“Good evening,” he said, wiping his mouth and setting down the bowl.

“Evening.” His only reply came from a group of two men sitting closest to him. A family sat further off and appeared determined to be uninterested in him even as they glanced over.

They exchanged the customary information. Berowne found that James and Dominic were travelling in the direction he had just come from and assured them that the rocky roads would dry more quickly than most. He concealed his point of origin, wanting neither his nobility nor the foolishness of his journey to be public knowledge. However, upon hearing that the men were not from far away, Berowne revealed a little to help his own cause.

“Do either of you gentlemen know where a person might find a hospital nearby?”

Their recoil was visible. Sternly James asked, “Why? Are you sick, sir? Tell us the truth.”

“I am not sick, I promise you. I have business there unrelated to health.”

“What business does a healthy man have at a hospital?”

“That’s my concern. Not yours. Do you know the way or not?”

“Outside of the city,” James answered at last. “Not far. You can reach it by foot if you don’t mind walking.”

“Thank you,” said Berowne. “You’ve been very helpful.”

The men continued to talk, but they were more reserved than before and soon excused themselves to their room. Berowne was surprised to find he was not tired and ordered a drink which he sipped slowly as he stared into the fire.

He wondered at the great fear the word “hospital” provoked, though he thought perhaps it shouldn’t have come as a surprise. It was a place where men came to die, and

all men, great and small, feared death. Berowne had been lucky, sheltered as he was in the palace of Navarre, to not be among the petrified masses the last time the Black Death had swept through the country. That had been many years ago now, nearly a decade, a time when he was too young to be really afraid anyway. There had been other illness in that time, but none so rampant, no symptom so able to freeze the blood with terror as the black lesions and swollen buboes. Berowne could only hope that the next year was as lucky as the ones in recent memory had been.

As the dancing flames in the fireplace burnt to embers and the yawning innkeeper asked him for the third time if he required anything else, Berowne returned to his room. It was cool and musty and by the light of his single candle, he could see his servant shifting restlessly in the same pile he'd collapsed in when they first arrived. However, he was no longer shivering and the soup bowl was sitting, licked clean, on the table.

Crawling under the thin blankets, Berowne wondered if the King let his servants perform their usual duties or if he had tried to function as a proper hermit. The thought of Ferdinand lighting a fire or chopping a vegetable was intensely amusing to him and Berowne had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing out loud. Perhaps he had been prudent enough to save some of that great lunch of his, knowing as he surely must that the hunting lodge held no provisions except what came from the palace.

He did not think of Rosaline, by now returned to her own palace, tried not to think of her and found it easier said than done. Berowne could not tell sometimes which was the woman and which was imagination. The charming creature he had danced with, who had danced with him in Brabant, winked and sparkled in his mind beside the woman in Navarre, beautiful in her determined haughty coldness, and he thought they could not be

the same. There was little point in wondering about it; she did not want him, would not have him, and would be forced to break her oath. Yet the first image persisted and softened the second with her smiles. Her dark eyes appeared to him whenever he closed his own and improbable love seized his heart, seized him everywhere and Berowne thought he would never sleep, not while her memory burned in his mind.

But sleep he did, somehow, as he must. Dawn would soon come and the new year would begin, bringing with it what it would.

Act III Scene I

Her black gown swept the floor as she walked, taking quick steps that betrayed her lateness. Though if she'd had her way, Rosaline might not make her meeting at all, so certain was she that it would be as somber and as dull as all these gatherings had been lately. Her heart was not hard toward her friend, the Queen. Charlotte had been as close to her father as any daughter might be expected to be and she had not been, as so many other pernicious minds around the court had been, waiting for his reign to end and hers to begin. But the evenings, mornings, and afternoons of this period of grief all blended together now that all joyful merriment was banished from the grounds. Rosaline had mourned, the old King was sufficiently remembered, and now she was ready to dance, play at games, and entertain lovely gentlemen.

Outside the door to the Queen's chambers, she paused to adjust her clothing, knowing that she was disheveled but trusting that the reason would not be obvious. Taking a breath, she turned the knob and pushed into the perfumed air.

The usual positions had been assumed. Charlotte sat at her vanity, determinedly straight-backed. Near to her but not too near, Maria and Katherine sat in the same chairs where they always sat. Maria slouched over needlework and Katherine plucked ineptly at a lute, stumbling through a popular song.

"Ladies, our group is complete," Charlotte said, catching sight of Rosaline in the mirror. "Though I fear, not for long. One of us is late and one must soon depart to an odious conference."

“My apologies, madam,” Rosaline said, bowing her head and taking a seat. “I was detained.”

Maria and Katherine exchanged looks but Charlotte only smiled, “Never mind. Even though the time is short, it calms my nerves to be with ones so dear to me.”

“Your gentlemen advisors still assume that flattery rather than rational discussion is the way to win your favor for their proposals?”

“Yes. If my poor face was a delicately drawn flower when I was but a daughter, as a queen it is smeared with colors that so captivate the attention of all who look on me that they do not bother to listen to what I say. I grow so tired of beating away the flatterers.”

“It is enough to make you long for the admiration of our scholars in Navarre, is it not?” Katherine asked. “Their high spirits and foolish vows made rather more entertaining than tiring sport.”

A small smile crossed the Queen’s face, “Aye, that was a merrier jest for happier times. Would I might encounter such silly men wielding wishes and flatteries in my council.”

Idly fingering the short string of pearls she wore always around her neck, Maria asked, “Has there been word from Navarre since we made our hasty departure?”

“I have not heard any,” the Queen said. “But my mind has been with France and with England for these two months. No messengers from Navarre have required my attention.”

“And none shall.” At last, after weeks of sighs and brooding, there was something to pique Rosaline’s interest. Her eyes sparkled, she leaned forward, and in the tone of

divulging a secret said, “Navarre is closed to all but critically urgent matters of state. The King is departed and only a council remains to decide on minor issues. Apparently they are in quite a state. They say Ferdinand left suddenly, leaving few provisions for his absence.”

The Queen’s face was unreadable. Looking levelly at Rosaline, she warned, “I hear enough gossip from the men of the government.”

“It is fact,” Rosaline said. “I have it from a gentlemen of that region. It is a subject of much discussion among all his subjects.”

“You have it from him and he has it of you,” Katherine smirked. “A very mutual exchange.”

“I’m sorry, I do not take your meaning,” Rosaline said, fixing the other woman with a hard look. “Would you perhaps like to make yourself more clear?”

“I think ‘tis clear enough for everyone.”

Rosaline exhaled breathily, but she clenched her teeth and did not engage Katherine. The blonde had made her opinion of her liaisons known many times over and Rosaline would not start the old battle again. Of course it didn’t matter that Katherine had had her own lovers; when they were with the Queen, it was Rosaline whose name was besmirched and Katherine’s whose was white as snow.

“And have the King’s companions departed with him?” asked Charlotte, ignoring this small display of cattiness. “They would follow his lead wherever it went if I esteem them correctly.”

“One has,” Rosaline admitted, feeling her body flush unexpectedly hot. “The Lord Berowne has gone to the capital. As for the other two, they remain at the palace where I understand they do quite little.”

The other three ladies each took in this unexpected news. As she considered it, Katherine admitted, “These gentlemen surprise me. I had rather expected they would ignore their promises completely.”

“Worthy men indeed that they should honor their word so,” Maria added, a shy smile on her face.

“And if they are as quick to congratulate themselves as you are, they will not last. A few weeks does not a year make. And the lords have already proven themselves to be the sort who will only keep a promise as long as it suits their whim.”

Rosaline shifted in her chair and did not take part in this discussion. Her own reaction to one lord’s name surprised her in a way that did not please her. The shiver that shot up her back and tickled her scalp reminded Rosaline of how she had felt in Brabant. Dancing at Brabant. In the dark at Brabant. She had allowed herself to be charmed then, but then the man she had danced with had been utterly charming. Talk of Berowne was widespread, but no sign had she seen of the hearty mocker whose quick tongue knew no limits. That had come later, like a blow, in Navarre.

Berowne and the others had been harmlessly ridiculous. Their romantic intensity provided an easy jest and though Rosaline would have preferred a more honest and serious delivery, she was satisfied to play. The broken oaths had annoyed her, but the pitiless mocking of the simple pageant had repulsed her. Here, then, was Berowne. He was a man who would break an oath when it no longer suited him. A man who would

shame innocent others to conceal his own shame. A man who sought to bend the meaning of words to his will, who was inconstant and believed himself superior to all others.

That realization had wounded Rosaline and made her harsh when issuing his sentence. It did not explain the flutter in her heart when his name was spoken.

“Well,” Charlotte said at last. “We shall have to watch ourselves. Else we may find our promises challenged by four changed men.”

Reacting to the little thrill she could not help and did not want any part of, Rosaline rose to her feet, “I would not count on it.”

Citing some forgotten task she had yet to perform, she excused herself from the conference, leaving behind her three friends to wonder and to speculate.

Act III Scene II

As the women marveled that the changesome lords were actually performing the tasks they had been prescribed, King Ferdinand of Navarre was roundly cursing every one of them. The best dressed hermit in the country was tired, dirty, hungry, and sore. Gone was the worry that his bed would be too uncomfortable to sleep in along with any ambitions toward study and toward leisure. His hands were worn, his skin tanned and weather-beaten, and the night was never long enough to soothe away the cares of the day.

His hunting lodge was no palace, but it did boast a number of large and comfortable rooms. Rooms that now grew dusty with disuse because Ferdinand could not manage to care for all of them. The fire in the dining hall was the only one he lit. He had pushed a large chair near it and if the King had time to sit, this was where he sat. He ate there, read there, and on some nights he slept there, too exhausted to make it all the way up to his chambers.

Ferdinand was perpetually hungry. He could hunt, of course, and was quite good at it; but with nothing but game on his plate, his palate grew bored and his digestion was disturbed. Early on in his stay at the hermitage he had decided that he would be resourceful. Consulting one of his books, Ferdinand identified certain mushrooms which were described as providing tasty sustenance. However, the plants he had gathered for his meal were not the same as those described. He had spent a week wretchedly ill and vowed to avoid that which he could not recognize on his own as a viable meal, leaving

him few options. He went to bed with a growling stomach and awoke with still no way to satisfy it.

The experience was a trying one, but Ferdinand reassured himself with the thought that he was handling things better than most men would have. He avoided mirrors and tried not to think about his unshaven and disheveled appearance. He could cook, if blackening venison was cooking, and he tried to document any wisdom he gleaned from his experience in a small “manifesto,” to prove that he had indeed put his heart into his task.

If he did not have much wisdom to record yet, at least his book helped him to keep track of the days of his sentence. One bright morning, the King awoke, stretched, and wrote: 23 October on top of a blank page. It had been two months to the day since he had left his palace.

“And only 300 days to go,” he laughed bitterly to himself.

After jotting a few lines, reflecting poetically on the milestone, Ferdinand rose and dressed. The clothes were dirty, but if they smelled, he no longer noticed. They hung even more loosely than when he first put them on, but he was grateful for the freedom of movement they allowed him when performing the most difficult tasks of the day.

This morning, like every morning, he made his way to the edge of the woods, his axe slung over his shoulder. Keeping even one fire burning was an endless task, but without it there were few other things he could do. The King learned quickly that a warm and bright morning could quickly turn cold and dark and no heat meant that his dinner would consist of raw vegetables. To avoid that fate, therefore, he would spend the

majority of his morning sectioning the branches and massive trunk of a felled tree into smaller logs then splitting the logs into burnable pieces.

Balancing the logs on the stump of the tree, the King raised his axe high above his head, liking the feel of the work in his arms and the feel of the power in the sound of the splintering wood. He struck through them cleanly, gathering up the pieces and tossing them into a creaky wheelbarrow he had found in the stables. If he was feeling particularly energetic or if the wood was dry and split easily, Ferdinand occasionally chopped more than a day's worth of wood to store up for cold or rainy mornings. Today was not one of those days.

The logs he was attempting to split had come from the trunk of the tree. They were strong, not easily broken, and Ferdinand often had to wrestle his axe out of the log after his swing had failed to cut it through. As he grew more frustrated, his breath grew more labored and harsh. He snorted through his nose like the horses he still had to exercise and feed. His skin perspired and stank and disgusted him. The log he was striking would not give more than two inches at a time and the jolt he received from striking such a solid object stung his hands and reverberated up his arms to his shoulders.

In his frustration, he felt everything and everything was an annoyance. The sweat that dripped down his back tickled him, but he could not scratch the itch. One part of the axe handle was rougher than the rest and he never failed to grab it exactly there, scraping his hands against the grain. A fly buzzed in his ear and, without thinking, Ferdinand whirled and attempted to obliterate it with his axe.

“Buzz near me will you?” he roared, holding the weapon at the ready and shifting from left to right as he searched the air for the insect. “We’ll see how much noise you make when I’m through with you.”

Ferdinand listened attentively for the offending insect, but in the silence of the landscape, the entire forest seemed to buzz. If he concentrated on his own haggard breathing, it seemed like the only sound in the world. But the moment he listened, really listened, life buzzed around him.

It was not the first moment he had noticed it, but as Ferdinand stood in the clearing with this axe raised to punish a fly, it overwhelmed him. The forest roared at him: the wind, the bugs, the trees. Even the leaves commanded his attention and the king was suddenly afraid. He was alone, but never, it seemed, entirely so. And as the trees whispered, he worried he was losing his mind.

Fighting the urge to shout again, Ferdinand swallowed hard and lowered the axe. He panted as he turned back to his firewood. The moment passed and his breath was again all he could hear, but the memory remained. Reasoning that it was warm enough to be without a fire for part of the day, the King grabbed his load and hurried back home.

Act III Scene III

“Shhh, good wench. Our meeting must be clandestine. Your groans will wake the palace.”

“If I do groan, tis your fault. I will not pretend to understand why we were obliged to walk so far with royal transport at your disposal. Or why we moved at all with a tidy room at mine.”

As he stopped abruptly, the girl crashed into Longaville. She cried out and he put a finger to his lips, begging her to “shhhh!” as he turned his head and searched up and down the corridor for any prying eyes. Satisfied with the silence, he looked back to the girl and smiled.

“Dear Mary, as I have told you before, my situation is delicate. Our affection, of course, is as true as all such forged over drink. However, much like the process the brewer uses to render such drink, such affairs are best kept secret. Understand?”

“Not at all. You’ve had too much secret ale.”

“Not nearly enough I think. My point is simple...” Longaville raised a finger in the air as if to deliver a great sermon and then paused to remember what his point was.

Mary was a pretty girl, with dark hair that fell from her updo and cascaded over her shoulders. As she sidled closer, she smiled, showing the gap between her front teeth.

“Poor forgotten point,” she purred, pressing her palms to his chest. “Shall I remind you of it?”

“I’ve remembered it on my own,” Longaville replied.

“Remembered it many times on your own, I should think.”

“My *point*—”

“Is coming to bear?”

In order to preserve what remained of his wits, Longaville wrested himself away from Mary and held her at arm’s length, “Is that some things should be private. I would not subject either of us to the gossip of the public and have brought us here where we may be private.”

“Of course. I have the utmost respect for private things,” Mary said, looking up at him from under her long eyelashes.

“I can see that you do,” Longaville smiled back. “This way. Our chamber is not far.”

They had taken a few steps when Mary mused, “I had not taken you for a private person, my lord.”

“Oh?”

“I and others see you often in public. Cavorting and gambling, drinking and the like. Usually with your friend.”

“Who says this?” Longaville demanded.

“Well everyone. How do you think I knew where to find you this evening? Everyone talks. But not to worry, my lord,” Mary added seeing his expression. “Among those who talk there are only two kinds of talk: from those who are openly envious and from those who are secretly envious. You have spirit and means and looks and grace and there is not a one who does not envy you your leisure.”

Longaville did not know what to think of this. He had considered himself as a man of many pursuits but not of leisure. Although, he supposed, the books in his majesty's library were dustier than they ought to have been. True he had not been to hunt for a time and true he rose late and drank often. But so did others, many others in fact. Why should he feel oddly about it?

It was not Mary's intent to turn Longaville to contemplation and she hurried to correct her mistake. "But that is neither here nor there. You wish for private things and so you shall have them. Your point will be well taken."

All concerns were pushed aside for a later examination and Longaville allowed his focus to be taken by more pressing matters. "A shortcut," he said, opening one of the doors to his left. "Our room lies beyond this one."

Mary entered the room first and stopped short just inside the entrance. "I thought you sought privacy?" she said with a smirk

They were both surprised to enter a brightly lit and cheerful space, already occupied. A fire burned in the north side of the room, dancing and crackling, warming the gentlemen seated near it.

"Longaville!" Dumaine, setting down his hand of cards. "We looked for you but to no avail. Where have you been?"

Also at the table were Armado and his page along with Costard who laughed, "He's been wenching! And caught a lovely Mary with his bait."

"Blessed Mary!" Armado chirped.

"Holy Mary!"

“A very different kind of Mary, no doubt,” Moth hiccupped, tipping back his drink.

They were all very drunk. Longaville could see he would have difficulty extracting himself from the room and dreaded the mocks he would receive as he attempted to do so.

“Simply Mary, if you please,” his companion said, curtsying clumsily. “Whether virgin or whore based on circumstance not name.”

“Honest Mary!”

“Worthy Mary!”

“How did you find such a Mary?”

“I found her quite well, as you see,” Longaville answered.

“Rather I found him. At the usual place on High Street,” Mary interrupted.

Looking up as he lost a small pile of coins to Costard, Dumaine pouted, ‘You went out without me?’

“Apparently you were already occupied.” Growing increasingly more annoyed, Longaville began inching across the room towards the doors on the far side. He pulled Mary along with him, who was giggling and pretending to blush at the winks she was receiving from Costard. Leaving Dumaine behind had been purposeful; Longaville wanted a break from his friend, who was becoming his constant shadow.

“That was my doing,” the Spaniard answered, turning in his chair to apologize. “I found it necessary to leave, to flee, to escape... eh, from Jaquenetta.”

“His goddess has proved to be but a painted wench,” Dumaine explained, dealing the cards for another hand.

“White and red hide maculate thoughts,” slurred Moth, teetering on his chair.

“What does he say?” Mary asked.

“Nothing the common tongue can comprehend,” Armado frowned. “The boy cannot hold his drink. It slows his wit and makes him miserable at cards. Up, dear boy,” he said, hauling Moth out of his chair. “We must hope you recover yourself in sleep.”

Armado deposited Moth a distance away from the table on the floor. If the floor was uncomfortable, it did not seem to bother the boy who seemed to fall sleep even as he fell to the ground.

“But, alas, now we are one short,” said Dumaine.

Costard examined his cards and asked, “How so? By my count we are one extra.”

While Dumaine puzzled out the numbers, Longaville realized Costard meant to bring him into the game. He attempted to usher Mary to the door, but she was more interested in the drunken party than him at the moment.

“Your friend, sir, will fill the chair. His Mary may perhaps grace him or someone else with a stroke of luck.”

“I think not,” Longaville objected even as Mary left his side and approached the table.

“Of course,” she said proudly. “No man has ever lost whom I decided should win.”

“Oh, I beseech thee stay, sir,” Armado said, rising to his feet. “For if you depart, so shall I be obliged to depart,” he swallowed and finished in what he thought was a whisper, “To Jaquenetta.”

Unmoved Longaville answered, “And so you should as you have pledged yourself.”

“I have not pledged myself to this! Not to such abuses as I suffer,” protested Armado. “To serve and to slave. To “fetch this don Adriano” and to “clean that don Adriano” with never a thanks or a “with my gratitude, don Adriano” in return. No sir, I had pledged myself to love and instead meet with mocks and hardships and no happy ending in sight.”

He finished his speech with a whimper and for one horrifying moment, Longaville worried the man might cry. However, Armado only drank deeply from his mug before slamming it down on the table, “Again I beseech you sir, do not depart.”

Costard did not make an attempt to hide his amusement at Armado’s misfortunes even as he took up his cause, “Yes, do not depart. You see, Mary is for it and when a country girl is willing, it does not do to dissent.”

There was no point in departing alone to sulk and he could not divert Mary’s attention from more colorful characters. Longaville sat miserably and had miserable luck at cards for most of the night while Mary sat in Costard’s lap, Dumaine and Armado grew increasingly drunk and Moth snored behind him.

Act III Scene IV

Though he never played until late at drinks or cards, Berowne rarely slept. If he did it was in fits and starts. Nightmares plagued his dreams and the stuff of them made up his days. He did not study, he did not seek entertainment. Food was forced on him by the mistress of the room he rented, but he had grown thin and pale anyway.

When he first stood at the doors of the hospital half a year earlier, Berowne had mocked himself. “What shall you tell them you are here for?” his mind asked. “To gawk and prod at suffering. Not to attempt to ease it as a doctor but to critique and rouse it to laughter. They will laugh you out if they do not escort you to the asylum.”

In the end, he had detailed the story to the head physician exactly as it had happened. Ferguson was a large man with a substantial beard and he had listened without interrupting. When at last Berowne had finished his weird tale, he felt he very much deserved the laughter that the doctor had responded with.

“I believe that woman means to kill you,” Ferguson chuckled. “Or if she does not, she certainly means to put you off the chase.”

Berowne admitted his suspicions to that effect and maintained his desire to proceed anyway. Whether he was moved by the tale or simply interested in furthering his own amusement, Ferguson had granted him a free run of the hospital. Berowne was welcome to speak to anyone he wished as long as he did not interfere or get in the way.

And so Berowne had begun to arrive day after day to serve out his sentence. In spite of his fears, he did not get sick. He found that most of those with variations of pox

or plague died or got well at home. The hospital held those whose organs required removal, whose bones were broken, or whose infections had spread to consume their limbs. Most problems were treated by some form of surgery and after a few weeks, Berowne determined he would much rather be in God's hands than a surgeon's.

He had walked in on one of these dissections once, seen the surgeons in process of removing a man's spleen from the bloody mess of his abdomen. He had braced himself against the door and muttered, "You have found the problem out, I see. I pray you advise the man that he ought to try to keep all his innard parts in" before spending the next quarter of an hour vomiting into a bucket.

It was the smell which affected him even more than the gruesome sights. In many of the hospital rooms, the places where windows should have been were bricked over to save the cost of glass. Stale, stagnant air filled the rooms. The smell of filth, blood, and infection pervaded his nostrils and Berowne could sometimes smell it even when he was far from the hospital.

The strange and disturbing things taken in by his senses were bad enough. But it was not long before pursuing his appointed task began to leave Berowne as sick as any of the gruesome sights in the hospital. Still, he pursued it with dogged determination. He had yet to move a patient to laugh, though he had at times moved them to tears. The physicians laughed though and it was their callousness that Berowne tried to imitate when he could no longer find the words for his own jests.

"That old man was a bleeder wasn't he?"

"The worst in a week. Right lucky we had the extra rags lying around from the operation last night."

“Has he been collected yet?”

“His widow arrived not long ago.”

“Young thing in need of support after the loss of her ancient husband?”

“Loud, sobbing girl. If she was pretty I couldn’t see it. Red-faced and wiping her nose on her sleeve. Disgraceful. Four dead this week and none of the family has any dignity about it.”

Berowne began to do his best to seek out patients who were recovering in spite of their butchers’ best efforts. He would wait until the post-surgical fever had subsided and their survival was more likely before prodding them with his words, telling the old man who was now one limb short that though he made a convincing pirate, the state of his clothes suggested he ought to dig up his treasure sooner rather than later.

He could not sleep and could not bear the images that assaulted him when he closed his eyes, so at night Berowne paced, cursing Rosaline and cursing himself the most. He dared not ask himself why he persisted, afraid of what the answer might be, but he knew that he was a fool for doing so. Any point that Rosaline could have been trying to make had been proven a hundred times over. Wit exhausted him. He looked back at the simple performance of the Nine Worthies with shame and wondered more than once if he could have saved himself this agony if he had just held his tongue.

He was musing on this in the late afternoon, traveling the corridors of the hospital not long before he usually departed for the day when he was stopped by a young surgeon. He looked barely old enough to have finished his education and though Berowne had seen and spoken to him before, he could not remember the man’s name. Their anonymity

was not mutual, however; everyone knew who Berowne was by now.

“You’re the jester?” he asked.

Berowne did not answer and his silence was confirmation enough.

“You might visit the third floor,” he suggested. “Last bed of the ward. Fever broke this morning.”

The tip was not unusual and because it was what he was sworn to do, Berowne reoriented his staggering steps to the stairwell. He would heckle one last convalescent before he departed.

There were no doctors about when he ascended the stairs. Except for an occasional moan, the ward was completely quiet. Keeping his eyes away from the less fortunate patients, Berowne headed straight for the last patient in the row. The man was still and pale under his blanket; in that respect at least, he resembled every other guest in the hospital. His hair was the color of trampled straw and there was a dirty bandage wrapped around his head. It was there that Berowne began.

“Is it your brain that ails you, sir, or your skull? I cannot believe a man with the intelligence of a flea would willingly enter this place so your ailment must be in the shell meant to protect it. Too thin a protection? Or more likely too thick.”

Stepping closer, Berowne caught a whiff of the stink of the man. He took in the broken vessels in the patient’s face and his massive stomach and wrinkled his nose. Louder, he said, “It was the bottle that did you in, I expect. A quick swallow down the gullet and then a quick rap to the side of your head. Drunkards rarely make good fighters, sir, and therefore make desirable opponents.”

The words poured out of Berowne's mouth, not one of them clever, and he thought he must be insane. He chastised a man who was not only ill but who did not even seem to hear him and he began to grow angry. Leaning close he declared, "An easy target indeed if you are deaf as well as thick-skulled and wine-slow. Like a lame or idiot doe a hunter is disgusted to shoot because it wanders willingly onto his path as if served up there."

Interrupting his tirade, a cold hand reached out to him from behind and Berowne nearly yelped as he spun to face the frail and white-haired man in the next bed over. He could not lift his head from the pillow but his pale blue gaze held Berowne's tighter than a hand at his throat as he rasped through dry lips, "Sir... do not... degrade the dead."

As the old man's words sunk in, Berowne's eyes grew wide with horror. His head snapped back to the man he had been railing against: the unnatural stillness, the ghostly pallor of his skin, the tint of blue on his lips and fingertips. Berowne backed away slowly and tried to keep his balance as the room suddenly seemed to lurch around him.

From the doorway there was a snicker. The nameless doctor stood there, watching him. "I told you his fever had broken. His temperature is not likely to drop much lower than now, is it?"

Summoning strength Berowne did not know he still possessed, he forced himself to march deliberately across the room. He leveled the young man with one strong blow and stepped over him to continue down the corridor.

Act IV Scene I

“I’m bored,” Dumaine complained, looking up from his text on astronomy and sighing heavily. “Are we going to be here much longer?”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Longaville shut his eyes tightly against the headache he felt coming on, “You’re always bored. And yes.”

Shifting around in his chair, Dumaine attempted to return to his book, but the dry prose blurred under his restless vision and he refocused his gaze to the window, “It’s just- I thought we’d go riding today. Or out for a visit?”

“Go if you like. You needn’t ask permission of me.”

Dumaine muttered inaudibly about not wanting to go by himself and Longaville shook his head. It had been like this ever since he had begun attempting to reform his sloth-like habits. The card game that had lasted until dawn and the realization, just as painful as the hangover, that he had really been about to bed a girl like Mary had convinced him that he simply could not continue in that vein. He had opened the door to the library for the first time in a long while the very next morning and had nearly lived in it, monk-like, ever since.

Against his will, Dumaine was forced to reform as well. He was not accustomed to solitary wandering or the burden of entertaining himself. So he read, but he pouted and he learned, but he was not pleased by it. Closing his book, he got up under the guise of finding a more suitable replacement on the King’s well-stocked shelves. Once he was far

away from his scholarly friend, Dumaine pulled out a small mirror from his pocket and studied his reflection in it.

It was a trinket he had recently taken to carrying, discreetly checking to see whether or not anything had changed in his appearance since the last time he'd checked. A beard, Katherine had wished on him. The ginger hair that sprouted in patches over his chin and cheeks, a little lighter in color than the hair on his head, would hardly suffice. Dumaine imagined that the rest of it couldn't be far behind and he was forever checking his progress in the mirror in case a full and impressive beard bushed forth while he wasn't paying attention.

"If you keep peeping at it like that, you're going to scare it away," Longaville advised, without looking up from his book.

Startled, Dumaine nearly dropped the mirror and hastily shoved it back in his pocket. He pulled a book off the shelf without looking at it and sulked back to the chair. "At least I won't go blind. Staring at books all day."

"No. I daresay your vision will be lost for other reasons." Longaville peered over the top of his book and asked, "I didn't know you were proficient in Latin."

"If the number of things you didn't know were much greater, you would have to take a permanent residence in this room." Dumaine's Latin was more than a little rusty, but he skimmed the pages anyway since he was not likely to read any other book either. As he slowly turned each leaf he ran a hand over his patchy beard and frowned.

Longaville could grow an impressive beard. When he was paying attention to his appearance, he tended to favor a clean-shaven look but as a scholar he was too focused to

bother and a stylish dark beard only took a day to cover his face. He was obviously smug about it too.

“Well how do you grow it then?” Dumaine asked as if Longaville had been taunting him with his facial hair.

“How do I do what?” Longaville’s headache had moved behind his eyes. He might have to stop reading for a while.

“Creams? Serums? Extra spice in your dinner?”

“I grew it,” Longaville said slowly, enunciating. “By being a scholar.”

“By being a *scholar*?”

“If you doubt me, check any drawing of any of the old masters. All bearded.”

Eyeing him carefully and searching for signs of deception, Dumaine considered this. “Why is that, do you think?” he asked.

“Couldn’t say. I would suppose it was a way for all that knowledge to be stored without harming the brain. Or perhaps it is simply a by-product of mental labor. Like sweat for physical labor.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“Have you any proof otherwise?”

Dumaine shrugged, “Suppose not.”

“Well there you have it.” Finding it increasingly difficult to hide his smile, Longaville coughed and raised his book to cover his face.

Looking down at his own, unreadable, text, Dumaine decided that giving study a chance couldn’t hurt. He’d already tried everything else. “Where’s the book I was reading?”

“In your lap.”

“Not that one. Where’s the one I was reading before?”

“You were reading before? Well perhaps you left it at the schoolhouse, in a hurry to depart after your lessons.”

Exhaling sharply, Dumaine said, “No. You’re not being very helpful.”

“You’re right,” Longaville answered, lowering his book. “Please accept my apologies. But you will have to be more specific. You read so *very* many things it is difficult for an observer to keep track.”

“The green one. The poetry. Sonnets, I think. I was reading it when the envoy arrived from France.”

Raising his eyebrows, Longaville was about to respond with another snide comment before realizing that he did actually have an idea where that particular volume was located, “You’ll have to begin another one, I’m afraid. His majesty took that one with him to his “hermitage”.”

Dumaine considered this and after a pause asked, “Can we go and get it?”

Longaville nearly dropped his book. “What do you mean, can we go and get it? He’s supposed to be a hermit. Hermits generally do their hermiting alone.”

“But they have guests, don’t they?” Dumaine pressed. “Don’t they give repose and audience to wary travelers who stumble upon them? I was really enjoying that book.”

“Out of the question,” Longaville said, slamming shut his book and rising from his chair. “If you want to study, you may do it here, but we will not go on a pilgrimage for poems and you will stop chattering away while I am trying to work.”

He swept from the room, feeling certain that the conversation was over. If Dumaine wanted to remain a smooth-faced dunce, then so be it. For his part, Longaville was more resolved than ever before to travel to France at summers end a more complete man.

Act IV Scene II

A few days later, Dumaine had turned the idea over so often in his mind that the green book of poetry whose title he could no longer even recall was the only volume which would suffice for study. Longaville had been clear in his disapproval of the journey and his refusal to partake in it. In case his words were not enough, the scholar had petulantly locked himself in the library for the day and would not even allow Dumaine to come inside and retrieve his hat. Luckily there were others who were pleased to leave town no matter what the reason.

“Gladly will I attend you, sir!” Armado said, shaking his hand in gratitude. “I would consider myself fortunate and honored and not a little in your debt.”

“Excellent! We shall leave at first light. Pack what you like, but leave the provisions to me.”

“You’re leaving?”

Armado froze and made a face as if something cold and slimy had been dropped down the back of his shirt. Slowly like a creaky door he turned to face his beloved. Jaquenetta stood in the doorway of their home –her home, both in deed and governing- so far along in her pregnancy she looked like she might give birth at any moment. Dumaine thought she looked like a tick about to pop.

He also thought he detected not a small bit of hopefulness in her voice as she asked if Armado would be leaving. Oblivious to this, the Spaniard reassured her, “Not for

long, querida mia. I am needed. This lord has requested my aid but when I am done assisting on this task I shall return to you.”

Now Dumaine was sure he caught pleasure. Jaquenetta appeared to find amusement in a joke she did not care to share and repeated, “You? Provide assistance? Very well, I won’t keep you.”

She disappeared into the house and Armado’s breath of relief was audible. “An angel,” he said. Then shaking his head, he shook Dumaine’s hand once more, “I shall see you at first light. Or sooner.”

* * *

Armado arrived well before dawn, accompanied by Moth, who would not be left behind. Dumaine was running slightly behind schedule and was groggy, the early hour conflicting with his usual habit of not rising until noon. However they were well-supplied (“We are taking advantage of a hermit’s hospitality. Surely it would be unkind of us to take the food out of his cupboard as well”) and the weather was promising. Longaville stood shaking his head as he saw them off.

Dumaine was so delighted with the spring, the company and his ingenuity in arranging the entire expedition that he was more concerned with enjoying himself than with retrieving the object he was on a quest for.

“Is this not what life is made of?” he asked his companions, stretching out on his half of the carriage.

The carriage hit a rut in the road and they all bounced a few inches in the air. “Indeed, sir!” Armado replied once they had come back down again. “I am reminded of a mission I served during my employ as a soldier. Our mission was to take a hill and we

began early. I remember as I sat upon my horse at dawn that the plain in which we had camped was shining like gold. Every man felt the blood in his veins and even the horses seemed to feel the desire to act in that morning air. Glorious days.”

“Exactly,” Dumaine replied. “Exactly, you put it perfectly. Days of action. Naturally you captured the hill.”

“The what?”

“You said that you were employed that day to capture a hill. I assume that you did. How could you not on a day such as that?”

“Oh. No. Regretfully nothing was gained on that day,” Armado answered, somewhat sheepishly. But his eyes shined as he grinned and added, “But there were other days.”

The trio did not stop for lunch and they reached the vicinity of the lodge by late afternoon. It looked the same as ever, nestled handsomely amidst the deep green of the forest foliage. No servants emerged to greet them as they had on the other occasions Dumaine had visited the dwelling, but he had not really been expecting any. Instructing those he had brought with him to leave their baggage on the road for now and see to the horses, he gestured for Moth and Armado to follow him up to the door.

“Hallooooo!” he called, cupping his hands around his mouth. “My Lord! You have guests in your wood!”

Hearing no response, Dumaine assumed Ferdinand was occupied or perhaps too deep within the large dwelling to hear him. He shrugged at his companions and entered the front door, which was not barred and opened easily without a creak.

Dumaine “halloed” again, but as before received no response. He swept through the lower rooms, finding that only two of them appeared to be receiving any use and only one of them regularly. A heavy armchair sat near an empty fireplace in the dining hall and the chair as well as the wall beside the hearth were darkened with soot. There was no sign of the King in the house and the three travelers returned to the lawn and puzzled at one another.

“Perhaps he’s gathering herbs?” Armado suggested, drawing on the only images of hermits in his imagination. “Or dispensing advice to a wayward traveler?”

Before Dumaine could point out that Ferdinand was not likely to be able to distinguish rosemary from hemlock, the servants who had accompanied him from the palace returned from securing the horses.

“Did not the King retain horses for his stay?” asked one.

“Of course he did.”

“Well they are not here now. No sign of them.”

A hundred possibilities stampeded through Dumaine’s mind. Perhaps the King had been attacked, his possessions taken as plunder by his assassins. Or perhaps, during winter’s brief frost he had been forced to dine on the horses for sustenance and then gone mad in the cold.

“Gentlemen,” he said, gravely. “I believe something very serious and strange may have transpired here.”

“Or perhaps nothing at all.”

Moth was pointing to the road where they had just been travelling and Dumaine was inclined to take the position that the sight *was* strange by virtue of its not being so

when it was supposed to be. King Ferdinand of Navarre sat driving two horses ahead of a small cart. He stopped when he saw them, clearly surprised, and then gave a sheepish wave as he called, “Hello.”

Act IV Scene III

It ended up being Dumaine who showed hospitality to the royal hermit by sharing his victuals. Ferdinand had potatoes and venison and vegetables to spare but he was short of fruit and cheese. Miraculously he also had a very fair store of fine wine and ale which his guests drank in enthusiastic quantities as he explained his situation.

Ferdinand's clothes were worn, but they were clean. He had grown a beard but he had trimmed it short. He did not seem at all beaten down or weary as he detailed his descent to his lowest point. The King spoke of endless labor, bitter chill, hunger that would not dissipate, the maddening silence, all while he poured himself another tall glass of wine.

"Each day was very much like the last," Ferdinand said around a mouthful of cheese. "And I began to think I might go mad or die before the year had passed. It was very trying.

"One afternoon I stood in the clearing you may have seen as you approached. The forest seemed to whisper at me. I could not tell which direction would lead me out. Somehow I found my way back to the lodge and without stopping to pack anything I readied the horses and made for the nearest civilization."

Speaking matter-of-factly, Ferdinand kept from Dumaine and the others his wild terror, his guilt and his shame. He had ridden as if chased, driving the horses to froth and would have left clouds of dust behind him had the roads not been frozen.

He had arrived in a small village where he had never been before and to his immense surprise, drawn no notice. Ferdinand was well aware of his wild looks, the disreputable figure he cut, thin and wiry in clothes caked with dirt, but no one recoiled in horror. Gradually the King had come to realize that he was not out of place here, that others such as he must have come to town when they could bear solitude no longer.

“It occurred to me in that moment what a fool I’d been. I actually began laughing in the middle of the street. For weeks I had been cursing dear Charlotte and her entire daft country for my suffering and how ignorant was I? How could she have known I would seclude myself from the world even until the detriment of my health? Every man is entitled to use all of his resources to make a life for himself and so then was I.”

Ferdinand leaned back in his chair, well satisfied with his self-sufficiency and bit into an apple.

“A wonder then he employs not a full staff to light his fires and drive his horses,” Moth mumbled to himself. “A wonder he does not make a hermitage of a palace if such is within his means.”

“But my lord, of course the lady intended it thusly,” Armado said, elbowing Moth who choked on his food. “And may I congratulate your most enviable success in executing your oath.” Dumaine echoed these sentiments and Ferdinand thanked them politely.

“But I have not asked my friends what brings them to my forlorn lodgings,” the King said. “I can offer no entertainment and little comfort. And I must confess that if it is wise and ancient council they seek, my friends may be obliged to visit some other lonely woodsman.”

“Dear sir,” Dumaine said, bowing his head in mock humility. “We weary travelers seek only shelter for a spell and the warmth of your fire. And to peruse your collection of poetry, such as you have.”

“Of course! You must stay as long as you need, my weary travelers.”

Dumaine had a difficult time determining whether the King’s situation was better or worse than he imagined. Life at the “hermitage” seemed a strange blend of luxury and austerity, ease and labor. The lodge was built for comfort but only a few rooms, more than a little dirty, were in use. Food could apparently be easily obtained and transported in a carriage, but could not be prepared without the labor of building and maintaining a fire. Ferdinand himself was well-groomed and healthy but sunburnt and calloused all over. The King had apparently committed as much of his will as he could manage to his orders and was obviously well-satisfied with the results.

The men ate, drank, and regaled each other with stories for the better part of the evening. Ferdinand enjoyed playing his role of the grizzled hermit entertaining strangers so much that he encouraged them to stay even after Dumaine had located the book he was looking for and pronounced it much duller than he had remembered. With the thoughts of nagging Jaquenetta and suddenly studious Longaville in mind, his guests were not difficult to convince.

Act IV Scene IV

The Lord Berowne had become a ghost. His pale, gaunt form moved without sound. Down the stairs. Through the corridors. He did not speak. He had lost the words for jest, could no longer conjure up a happy, biting wit. Even outside the hospital the summer sun seemed dark, the people coarse. Inside, he walked in a continual horror, eyes wide to every groan and every face around him. He could not keep them out.

It had happened as she planned. Sickly ears would not hear idle scorns and any jesting spirit had left Berowne as much as he had left it. Yet it had not happened as she had planned. Could not have. He prayed it had not. Such cruelty as that, Berowne was sure he did not deserve, in spite of his faults. He had become that fear which grips all men as they think upon their death. Not be remembered fondly, not to be wept over or cared for in that last pain but instead to be scorned. His part in the suffering of so many fragile souls condemned him, burdened his own soul with an ache that would not ease.

“A man replete with mocks” he surely was. Or had been. Berowne agonized over each flippant remark. Jests that had tickled him and brought him praise from his companions. Times he had sought to hurt and pleased in it. He saw the Nine Worthies on the makeshift stage and he saw them dead, stumbling over some lines and forgetting others. Their performance was farcical but they were dead and did it matter? Rather than sweet recognition he delivered them scorn and his laughter and the laughter of the lords was grotesque.

Oh he was cursed. Berowne's wit was dry; his tongue slumbered behind his lips. The physicians had grown concerned. They who dealt with illness every day could not help but see it as it walked among them. If they had been concerned when Berowne used the last reserve of his strength to punch the young doctor, his current stupor was frightening.

Ferguson stopped him one day on his endless wander. Obediently Berowne froze and tried to look at him but there was a faint fog in the room. The older man was blurred around the edges and his voice was far away. He spoke of years nearly over and young women who surely did not intend for this.

“There is no reason to persist in this madness.”

It occurred to Berowne that the heat of the summer had rendered the hospital air even more rank than usual. He had thought he was used to it, but it was invading his nose and his head, consuming him. He wobbled on his feet as the floor lurched, tilting this way and then the other like a ship at sea. He looked up into Ferguson's face, wanting to say something, but unable to remember what it was.

He fell into blackness and Berowne did not have time to wonder if anyone would catch him.

Act IV Scene V

Dumaine's beard continued to be problematic, but he grew stronger and, he dared to think, smarter in the final month before his sentence was ended. He remained for three weeks at the hunting lodge with Armado, Moth, and the King. The four of them together were able to do what Ferdinand had not managed on his own, which was make the lodge fit for any inhabitants. Ferdinand made a big show of performing "hermity tasks" and dressing each day in his rags, but the hierarchy the guests naturally adhered to meant that he rarely had to lift a finger in physical labor.

While not abject poverty, it was a more difficult life than he was used to and Dumaine regularly went to bed sore and woke up feeling tired. Somehow, however, he enjoyed this. Fatigue aged him a little, made him look more distinguished. Eventually he decided that a goatee and a mustache were just as impressive as a full beard and when Dumaine looked in a mirror, he could convince himself that he had grown much more over the past year than he in fact had.

He was stronger, neither his face nor his hands were so smooth as they had been and he was ready, he thought, for Katherine and for the future. Dumaine did not work at the lodge as servants did or for survival, but he felt the value of it anyway. A short span had been sufficient to cure him of the desire to be completely idle. He could not, like Longaville, labor over books, but he privately swore that he would to some purpose devote himself.

The end of the year snuck up on him, but not on Ferdinand who all but bounced down the stairs one morning to announce, “We have but two days, my friends. And I shall almost be sad to leave my dear hermitage. However, it is time. I propose that you and I, Dumaine, stop only briefly at the palace and depart before week’s end to fair France and fairer happiness.”

Armado looked as if he had forgotten about the existence of the outside world. “My page and I would be happy to attend your majesty abroad, should you wish it,” he said.

“Nay, don Adriano. I have kept you too long from your own oath already. And this has been no life for a gentleman. Return to your fair angel and to lesser labors.”

Gracious, but disappointed, Armado accepted the response while Moth lamented, “Fair labor that should keep us from a lesser angel.”

With two carriages at their disposal, it was no trouble at all for the men to transport themselves back to the palace, leaving the lodge empty and waiting for more relaxing visits. They arrived to a crowd of statesmen who offered their congratulations and greetings as required, but who provided on the whole a rather cool reception. It took Ferdinand the better part of a week to soothe their ruffled feathers and conduct the business which could not wait a moment longer, upsetting his plans to depart immediately for France.

“We must be on our way in the morning,” the King grumbled during a late dinner. “The Queen and her ladies will think that we have forgotten them.” He was also beginning to notice a change for the better in his appearance. Ferdinand was looking healthier and the color was beginning to fade from his skin and he was determined to

arrive in France before it was no longer possible to discern from his appearance that he had recently suffered some horrible hardship.

Dumaine assented readily, but Longaville was more pensive, “Ought we not to wait for Berowne to return from his quest?”

Glancing toward the empty chair at the table as if he had just noticed they were missing a usual guest, Ferdinand frowned, “I think not. It is likely he has gone ahead of us to claim his bride and will not return for some time. Or else he has found himself forsworn and may not return at all.”

“Or he has encountered some trouble or has been detained for another reason.”

“Oh that sounds much more likely,” Dumaine chimed in on Longaville’s side. “It is not like Berowne to avoid his errands or to break an oath. At least not this one.”

“There is some truth to this, I suppose,” the King said after considering it. “Such behavior is unlike our Berowne.”

The more he thought about it, the more worrisome Ferdinand found Berowne’s absence. A day or so delay in arrival was understandable, but it had been a week. And the capital was not so far from the palace. But the King did not much want to wait around either. He was resolved to go to France.

“I will send someone for him tomorrow,” he decided. “We three will to France and God willing he may join us there.”

Act V Scene I

The Queen wore a blue gown, one that suited her well and set off the sparkle of her eyes better than any black frock ever had. To her surprise, Charlotte was ready for the cheerful color. Many bitter tears she had cried for her father, so many that her store of them seemed to have dried up. A year had passed and she was able at last to remember the man with smiles instead of tears. She was ready to move forward.

To exactly which future she would now depart, however, Charlotte was unsure. The distant rumblings from Navarre that Rosaline had heard first were now well known throughout the country. She could not doubt his year's absence. Ferdinand *had* attempted her challenge and the missive she had received, announcing his visit had conjured all manner of fluttering in her chest.

Amongst her ladies there had been a mix of reactions to this news. Maria was hardly able to keep her countenance for joy and Charlotte could not help but smile at her young and eager love. Katherine had been surprised, most of all. She had hardly seemed to consider that her suitor would return after so long a spell. She was flattered and yet more anxious than pleased, she who distrusted love and had never sought it for herself. And Rosaline- Charlotte had to shake her head at Rosaline's stubborn refusal to betray anything she felt.

The four women stood together, waiting side-by-side in the room Charlotte always used to hear suits. With a nod of her head, the Queen signaled the man at the door who nodded in reply and pulled open the great doors to admit her guests. With their hats

in their hands and their eyes lowered, the men entered and assembled in a line, each in front of his lady. With a glance, the ladies counted them. Three men.

Charlotte knew that Rosaline would loathe having attention drawn to herself and so resisted her urge to reach for her hand in a comforting gesture. Her dark-haired friend stood stoically, not making a sound or even seem to flush. Berowne was not in attendance.

“Fair lords, you are warmly welcome to France,” the Queen greeted, smiling at each man in turn.

“And our humblest thanks for your great courtesy my Queen,” responded Ferdinand with a bow. “It is too long since our eyes have set upon thee and yet I see that in loveliness you have not changed.”

“My visage is as it was, unpainted, and I hope that in essence you shall find me also unchanged. However, I do not hope the same for my findings of yourselves. Have you been altered, my lord?”

“Your majesty shall make the final judgment. For my part, I have toiled these twelve months in a solitary hermitage and find that want and chill and labor have transformed my mind. I dare to suggest that my lady will find my mood no longer so changesome, my words no longer so uncensored.”

His appearance was evidence to the tales Charlotte had heard of his year of toil. She had expected a hesitancy perhaps, a discomfort in the presence of society after so long in seclusion. However, though his voice did not creak of disuse, Ferdinand’s words were clear and unornamented and the Queen found that she trusted his assertions.

“Your voice speaks truth and the wear of your body speaks more,” she said. “and we are glad as well to see that others have hearts so loyal as their King’s and return also on their oaths.”

Dumaine and Longaville both acknowledged her words with a bow.

“However, if my memory be not hazy, it seems to me we took our leave of four men twelve months ago. Where is the Lord Berowne?”

Beside the Queen, Rosaline had grown more and more tense. Her hands clenched at her sides and she stood rigidly as if her body was hardened against the entire conversation. But she fixed her gaze tightly on the King as they awaited his answer and her eyes burned.

The three men exchanged uncertain glances and there was something superior in Longaville’s as if he had been proven correct on some previously discussed matter. Ferdinand shifted a bit before answering, “Do not suspect, fair Queen, that our Berowne’s absence is evidence of his being forsworn. For none of us were so resolved as he and I have no doubt that he has kept his word.”

“Yet he is not here.” The hard voice was Rosaline’s, demanding with a black tone that Ferdinand explain the situation.

“No. No he is not. We have had no word of him. But! We have commissioned a messenger to visit the city where we know him to be. The messenger is a loyal one who departed even before ourselves and I dare to hope we will hear word of Berowne before the morning. One way or another.”

“For the sake of our merry party, I pray it is so,” Charlotte said. “But come. Let us talk separately and not face each other as two opposing armies. I wish to study this changed man and his claims.”

Three couples reunited, too excited for real propriety but attempting to maintain the image of it by declaring, “How it pleases me to see your face again” rather than exclaiming “my dearest, my dearest!” and embracing on the spot. They could not help themselves and all were soon lost to the outside world amidst declarations and tales.

Unmissed outside this happiness, Rosaline took her moment to slip from the room. She had sudden desperate need for fresh air and walked purposely toward the nearest exit. There were a few people in the corridor and she avoided looking at them directly. Pausing near the door, she closed her eyes, allowed emotion to strangle just one deep breath, and then pushed through the door and out into the oppressive summer heat.

Act V Scene II

Longaville and Maria stood close to one another, talking softly and smiling sweetly. He had renewed his declarations, praising her fine eyes and declaring himself a beggar at her feet. She had to struggle not to betray exactly how elated she felt. If it wasn't for the unexpected death of the French king and Charlotte's own reservations about her suitor's intentions, Maria would have been married a year ago. In the interest of female solidarity she had postponed her happiness, but despite the doubts of her friends and the sly looks they exchanged when they thought she was being naïve, Maria had never really doubted Longaville would return.

“As I promised, I will gladly exchange my black gown for a faithful friend.”

“And these words are as sweet as honey after a fast as long as ours,” Longaville said, a wide smile lighting up his serious countenance.

Gazing up from under her eyelashes, Maria baited him, “Truly I did doubt whether you would find such a mean reward enticing enough to fulfill the challenge.”

“In all the world there could be no greater treasure. A man may toil a year and more for the chance to be as rich as I,” was his very satisfactory reply.

Across the room, Katherine kept a distance from Dumaine. She crossed her arms over her chest and observed him quietly, making no sign of her inward thoughts.

He sensed her hesitance and cautiously asked, “I do believe I once heard my lady say that if she had much love to give, she might give me some?”

“A lady did say this. Once.”

“And...” Dumaine fidgeted where he stood, flicking his eyes up to her face, but blushing too hard to maintain eye contact. “How does she find her stores of love twelve months later? Are they full? Does she have much to spare?”

His innocent eyes and hopeful voice worked on Katherine’s heart. It had not taken many meetings for her to esteem Dumaine, but she was reluctant to declare that the same as love. She had seen her dear sister waste away from a heart burdened by love and she had seen other souls turn bitter and faithfulness turn to betrayal. It was useless to trust a promise made at the height of infatuation and things said one day would not always be honored the next. Katherine understood that.

But Dumaine had waited and he had returned to her. It wasn’t everything, but it was more than she had expected from the quick-leaving lord and his adolescent poetics and pledges. She wanted to believe him.

His head was still bowed before her when Katherine uncrossed her arms and blessed him with an uncertain smile, “Your gentle manner and constancy please me more than honey-tongued phrases. I am leery of cruel Cupid and his warrior bow, but honest Dumaine and his desire to please may take my hand. I know not how much love I possess, but you might take your fill. Provided you have some to offer me in return.”

Dumaine took her hand eagerly and brought it to his lips, “Sweet lady, my heart is thine and all that you desire.”

They spoke softly so that only whispers of heir love reached the ears of the two royal rulers whose hearts’ fates had yet to be decided. It was Charlotte’s desire to hear first tales of the year that had passed before talking again of the future.

“I have often wondered,” said she. “Whether my task for you was too hard. To require a King forsake all comfort and all duty for myself. Whether it was fair to test your will with so much want and so much labor. But I see that rather than falter, your majesty has triumphed.”

“Madam,” Ferdinand said. “There could be no undertaking too great to be undertaken for thy dear heart. As for hardships, those were of course many; but no frost, no hunger, no thin garments or hard labor could sway my heart from its purpose.”

In the week following his return to the palace, Ferdinand had regaled every person he encountered with tales of perseverance in the wilderness. It had bothered him that he had nearly run out of new stories and new ears willing to hear him so he was more than happy to answer all of Charlotte’s questions. Of course, the King may have opted to omit a few details of his sentence, but after a year he couldn’t be expected to detail each event in its entirety. Ferdinand remained certain that he had upheld his oath as well as the Queen could have hoped and saw no reason to search for further validation on that point.

Charlotte listened to his details with an attentive ear, choosing to ignore the few descriptions of his survival. If Ferdinand was not perfect, he had proven himself able to remain true where many others would have failed. She had wished it, privately, especially on the all too frequent occasions when it was hinted and boldly so that a Queen must marry and marry early and marry well. Her black gown had protected her for the most part from meddling and suitors, but there were decisions to be made. She could see sense for uniting France and Navarre as allies and taking the loving and slightly silly king for hers.

There would be an alliance. Charlotte raised her hand to stop Ferdinand in the middle of the story of how a violent storm had shaken the walls of his hovel and he had worked through the night to continue to empty the containers he used to catch the leaks in the ceiling. He seemed put out by having to stop but matched her smile with one of his own.

“I must hold your oath to me fulfilled,” she said. “And if your wishes are unchanged by the toil ordered by my hand, then I must uphold mine to you. I will be thine.”

“Then you made me as happy as any such man ever was.”

There was continued discussion between them about the date of such a wedding and the inevitable objections and arrangements that would have to be dealt with before an event of such significance could take place. Charlotte was just about to suggest that the lords of Navarre be shown to their lodgings so they might rest after their journey (with a quip about unfortunately being short of tents and having only furnished rooms to offer) when the doors to the room were flung open.

The door guards pointed their weapons at the intruder but it turned out to be only Rosaline, breathing heavily and followed closely by a messenger who bore the colors of Navarre.

“Frederick,” the King said, the first of the six to recover from the sudden intrusion. “I did not expect you so soon. Welcome.”

“I had good horses, sir,” the messenger bowed. “And the terrain made for easy travel.”

“Tell him your news,” Rosaline ordered. “What you have already told me. Make haste.”

He had approached the palace while Rosaline was making another turn through the courtyard. Ignorant of the heat, she had been walking for some time, cursing Berowne for his charm and for the cavalier manner in which he treated a vow, that he had promised to fulfill the oath, and that she had given it. Most of all, Rosaline cursed herself for daring to hope that she could have changed him and that he would come to her. She told herself that the wetness in her eyes was due to the pollen of the garden’s pungent flowers and was wiping furiously at her face with her sleeve when the messenger had approached. She stood now beside him, feeling sick to her stomach as she waited for him to repeat the words that had chilled her heart.

“Your majesty, I have come from seeing the lord Berowne,” Frederick began. “Or rather, I have come from seeing those who have seen him. The man himself was not at liberty to see me.”

“What was his excuse? Was it made clear that your purpose was royal and urgent?”

“Of course, sir. But it was told to me that Berowne is not seeing anyone. He is ill, sir.”

“Gravely ill,” interrupted Rosaline. “He condenses the matter for his majesty’s ease, that it may not seem so dire but to me he has said “gravely.” And why not? He has spent a year among the sick and dying.”

Maria stepped forward to attempt to sooth her friend, but Rosaline could not be comforted. Her hair had fallen loose from where it had been pinned and she kept her hands carefully clenched at her sides so she might not use them rashly.

The other two lords now looked concerned and, responding to Rosaline's insistence, Ferdinand fixed the messenger with a stern look, "Is it true? Have you said "gravely"? What is the manner of this illness?"

Frederick flushed, "Indeed, sir. Gravely. The physicians I spoke to could not decipher a cause nor offer opinion as to what the outcome might be."

"I see."

Ferdinand did not immediately offer a plan of action and after looking frantically between all of the equally frozen men in the room, Rosaline addressed her Queen, "Madam, we must send for him."

Charlotte shook her head, "This is troubling news. But certainly Berowne is better served in a hospital among those who can care for him?"

"Oh, no one ever got better in a hospital," Rosaline snapped. "Allow the physicians of the court to attend to him that he may have treatment fitting for a noble lord and not be condemned to die beside other poor wretches." She paused for breath and her hard look softened, "I beg of you. Do not allow me to be responsible for that man's death."

"He must be sent for," Ferdinand agreed in the silence that followed. "By Navarre if not France."

"Navarre and France are one," Charlotte said, resting a hand on his arm. "And will send immediately for Lord Berowne."

The Queen summoned messengers of her own who were informed of their task and departed to accomplish it within the hour. Reunion and merriment were put on hold for the three betrothed couples and Rosaline could only sit and fret, alone with the weight of her conscience.

Act V Scene III

It was dark when they came for him. Berowne could not open his eyes, but he could sense the chill of their presence. Death's comrades had come to fetch him; their white horses waited outside. But he did not want to go. Berowne pleaded and protested but his words meant nothing. They materialized as only wretched moans and he was lifted up out of his bed by half a dozen cold hands and transported out and beyond.

The journey to the other world was smoother and took longer than he would have thought. He was wrapped in a warm blanket, but Berowne could not get warm even as his sweat soaked his clothes. Voices murmured around him in solemn tones that he could not quite make out and he could not seem to rouse himself to ask them what they were about. He was worried, he was confused, and he began to panic, thrashing about such as he was able, trying to escape from the anonymous figures who held his life in their cold hands. Finally, he was held down. A bitter tonic was forced down his throat, one which he swallowed reflexively, and Berowne slept.

* * *

They brought him to an empty room in the French palace where he could be monitored, nearly constantly, by the court physician who took notes on Berowne's condition, administered remedies, and looked grave.

"I can treat his body," the doctor said to Ferdinand and Charlotte. "But he mutters and rants as though the affliction is in his soul and for that we can only pray."

So they did pray and they did fret and the hours stretched on like years. Berowne was not allowed visitors, but he had many passers-by. A lord or a lady would rationalize that *that* hallway was the best route to get where they were going, surely. Their steps would be slow and their hearts quick. They would tip-toe past the door many times a day and sometimes, drawn to it, they would brush their fingertips against the rough wood of it and wish or sigh and quickly be on their way.

Behind the door, Berowne fought fever and nightmares. He slept, mostly, though he did not wish to. Each time he awoke, he was greeted by the unreadable face of the doctor who would ask him how he felt. "Like death," Berowne would croak through his dry throat. And then he would slip away again. Almost always he dreamt of faces contorted with hatred for him. Bandaged, sick, dying, dead, pitiful, horrible faces who had been waiting for his turn.

Sometimes, however, Berowne saw what he could not have seen, what could not have appeared in those depths. Brown eyes. Red lips. A soft touch. In these fragmented hallucinations, Rosaline exuded a gentleness that made him ache. Her smile, her tears, her anger, her fear. Her. Just her. Berowne no longer cared about what he deserved. He was thankful for the respite his exhausted imagination granted him, for this one favor. Reaching out of his stupor he looked for her, waited for her, willed her shimmering form to appear.

And then, one evening, Berowne opened his eyes and the shape of the room was crisp and clear. The drowsy fog that had settled in seemed to have dissipated. As he lifted his head, raising himself with great effort up to his elbows, Berowne was disappointed to

see that he had not woken up after all. Rosaline sat not far away, her pretty face lit up in delighted surprise.

“I suppose I dream still,” he sighed.

The figure that was Rosaline rose and hastened to his side, “My lord, you do not dream. Or else surely I do. I had begun to think it was only in dreams I would see your eyes open again.” Looking away, she lowered her voice and said, “You slept for so long.”

“I dreamt of you,” Berowne said, laughing once. “The hard face of the woman who sought to repair my faults often came to me, though she did not smile as you did when first I saw you.”

“Speak not of that woman,” Rosaline said sharply. “She was a fool.” It hurt her to be reminded that she was the cause of Berowne’s suffering, though it was hard to forget while he lay, gray-faced, in front of her.

“Well. I am at your disposal. Tell me of what you wish me to speak and I will try my tongue at it. However, I confess to being somewhat out of practice.”

He coughed as if to illustrate his point and Rosaline quickly provided him with a cup of water. She wondered if he knew the effect his words had on her. Every second he did not reproach her, shout at her, twisted the knife lodged in her heart. Rosaline remembered suddenly how she told of her master plan to torment any man who would win her heart. Task him until he was a fool to her whim. The other ladies had laughed, but it had been forced and Rosaline blushed to think of how proud of herself she had been for pledging to be a brutal master. Her whip had found its mark on Berowne’s back and in her pride she had struck harder than she thought she could. Her power stunned her and the prospect of exercising it again on so willing a subject made her shudder.

“Nay, sir,” she said. “It is not for me to give instruction or decide how you should speak. Say as you please and do not mind me.”

Berowne considered this and did not respond right away. He was encouraged by Rosaline’s presence and the new softness with which she addressed him. Guilt was apparent on her face. The unease showed in the way she continued to bite her lip and in the way her hands did not stop moving. They picked at her nails, adjusted her hair, and tugged at her sleeves. It was a picture he had often longed to see: himself victorious and Rosaline humbled. But this was not how he imagined it. Berowne had forgiven her the moment he had seen her though he could not explain why.

“As you wish,” he said. “There is only one thing it pleases me to say before I fear I must succumb to sleep once more. If you will hear it.”

“Of course.”

Looking away, Berowne took a deep breath and said, “It is not my intention to challenge the oath you made to me. I suspect that it was made with the belief that I would not uphold my word. It was a reasonable gamble and as I have been guilty of speaking too quickly, I will not hold my lady to heated and arrogant promises. In the future I will expect for myself and for all my friends that yes mean simply yes and no, no, without condition, pageantry, or circumstance.”

“My lord...” Rosaline began, but trailed off. Tears rose in her eyes and she blinked them back. Berowne’s suspicions were correct. That he had understood her cruel purpose and honored her all the same, would release her all the same... It occurred to her that Berowne was allowing her the chance to step freely away from her oath rather than hear him declare that he had finished the challenge and found the prize to be unworthy.

After all of her encounters with love. After being proven right in her assumptions about the unworthiness of so many other men, Rosaline was not prepared to find a man who was not only worthy, but perhaps more worthy than she deserved. She did not quite know what she ought to feel or what she ought to expect (or rather, feared that she knew exactly what she ought to expect), but Rosaline found she could not simply release him.

“My lord, the words you spoke are true. It was my intent to humble you, and I find instead that it is I who walk the lowest today. However I must decline your gentle offer to rescind my vow. You have suffered much and toiled much and all at my hand. Yet I do ask that you challenge my promise, made again now by a truer heart and truer lips.”

She paused, meeting his eyes and her voice was steady, “But if, as you say, the time for oaths has past and the time for honest ‘yeas’ is come, then allow me to offer one. I say simply yes. And yes and yes. If you will only ask. Set aside toil and labor at love for a while.”

The feeling that jolted through his body and ended in his heart was almost painful. For all that Berowne had wished when he began for an ending like this, over the past twelve months he had slowly forgotten to hope. And now, after everything, it seemed his story was going to end like an old play after all.

Perhaps it was foolish. Perhaps he should return to Navarre as soon as he was able and put the painful memories of the year behind him. But Berowne had kept his promise; he was a changed man. Surely after a year of hardship, after proving himself worthy, he deserved the reward he had fairly won. Future bliss.

Looking into Rosaline's eyes as she anxiously awaited his response, Berowne saw that she desired this too. And so he answered for both of them.

“My lady,” he said, his voice wavering with more than the exhaustion of illness.
“If you accept, then I propose.”

Act V Scene IV

In time, Berowne recovered completely, even his wit, though he never fashioned it as a weapon nor wanted to.

He was not back on his feet for the wedding of Longaville and Maria who rushed down the aisle as soon as the shadow of death was no longer hanging overhead. For a young couple at the height of love's passion, delay of anything was inconceivable. Children came for them swiftly and in large numbers. Such large numbers that Longaville often retreated to the refuge of his study. Though he did not bar the door and doted on his besotted wife and their rambunctious children.

On the other hand, Katherine refused to rush to the altar. It was another half year before Dumaine's sweet wooing and her own unexpectedly swelling belly led to a marriage. She may have had occasion to doubt her husband's wits, but not his love. Even when their home provided an escape for the tedious Armado (who had, after all, married his shrewish angel) and her patience wore thin, Katherine thought that perhaps Cupid was not the vile boy she had thought him.

The King and Queen of Navarre and France got along much more famously when they did not share a bed. Charlotte saw quickly that Ferdinand still bent rules, laws, and vows just ever so slightly in direction that best suited him. She felt obliged to be repetitive and clear on any issue of agreement, he found her to be a nag, and they existed as amicably as any such couple could be expected to do, creating laws and heirs but not romance.

All three couples were, of course, a source of amusement for Berowne and Rosaline. They loved, worked, fought, and lived as equals. Each slightly in awe of the other yet never in a battle for superiority.

As promised, neither of them spoke to the other of the past. However, as it inevitably was mentioned and discussed in the mixed company of their friends, both Rosaline and Berowne reflected privately that they had been the victors in that particular compromise. Each the least deserving and each rewarded the most handsomely with a gift beyond their wildest imaginings.

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