



Article

Eros and Etiology in *Love's Labour's Lost*

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Abstract: In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the creation of an academe where study is posited as the antidote to the diseases of the mind caused by worldly desire results in an epidemic of lovesickness. Lovesickness, otherwise known as 'erotic melancholy' or 'erotomania', was treated in contemporary medical documents as a real, diagnosable illness, a contagious disease thought to infect the imagination through the eyes, which could be fatal if left untreated. Such representation of love as a communicable disease is drawn, I suggest, from a neoplatonic tradition led by the work of Marsilio Ficino, particularly his fifteenth-century treatise *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*. Ficino's construction of *eros* as a kind of 'vulgar love', distinctive from 'heroic love', emphatically denotes lovesickness as a kind of material contagion with the eye as its primary means of transmission, an idea that had a more significant influence in England and on the work of playwrights like William Shakespeare than has previously been acknowledged. For all its lighthearted conceits, *Love's Labour's Lost* takes lovesickness and its etiology very seriously, in ways that have been almost entirely ignored by scholarship on this play.

Keywords: lovesickness; contagion; Shakespeare; *Love's Labour's Lost*; neoplatonism; Marsilio Ficino; *eros*; melancholy; eyes



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Towards the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*, a play brimming with strange juxtapositions of the serious and comic, we see a disarmingly sincere image of the potentially fatal effects of love melancholia. A conversation between the French Princess and her attendant ladies about gifts of expensive jewelry and effusive poetry, "love in rhyme" (5.2.6)¹, that she has received from Ferdinand, the smitten King of Navarre, takes a sudden dark turn. A couple of punning references to "Cupid's name" (9) being obscured by the King's seal on his verbose sonnet, in a way that would make his "godhead wax" (10), remind the women that the eternal boy-god's powers could also be deadly:

ROSALINE [. . .] For he hath been five thousand year a boy.

KATHERINE Ay, and a shrewd unhappy gallows, too.

ROSALINE You'll never be friends with him, a killed your sister.

KATHERINE He made her melancholy, sad, and heavy,

And so she died. Had she been light like you,

Of such a merry, nimble, stirring spirit,

She might ha' been a grandam ere she died;

And so may you, for a light heart lives long. (11–18)

The moment is unexpectedly painful and heartfelt. The story of Katherine's sister serves as a bleak but genuine reminder that the early moderns considered lovesickness, that most peculiar kind of melancholy, an all too real and dangerous affliction. 'Lightness' and a "merry [. . .] spirit" are figured as preventatives against the "heavy", lethal, sadness of love-borne melancholy, "for a light heart lives long". The somber tone is relatively fleeting, the ensuing discussion quickly returns to comic punning on 'light' and 'dark' as measures of character, sexual laxity, and physical weight. As Drew Daniel's insightful reading has noted, in the context of the play's repeated privileging of posture and façade

over sincerity, this moment brings the gravity of melancholic illness into sharp focus: “If love melancholy can kill people, then melancholy is not just a matter of appearance after all” (Daniel 2013, p. 88). I wish to significantly extend this idea in this essay.

The brief tale of death-by-lovesickness encapsulates a broader anxiety about death and lethal epidemic disease that pervades the entire play. It hangs over the final scenes, presaging the equally sober announcement of the death of the French king and bringing full circle a play that commenced with another king worrying over the “disgrace of death” and “cormorant devouring time” (1.1.4–5). But it also continues the play’s near-constant meditation on love as a contagious disease caught through the eyes. The visit of the French Princess and her ladies to the quarantined court of Navarre, “a little academe” (13) set up as a bulwark in a “war” of “affections” (9) against “the huge army of the world’s desires” (10), unleashes a veritable epidemic of lovesickness in the King and his courtiers. It is an affliction repeatedly explained in ways that are consistent with early modern theories of vision and medical understandings of lovesickness as a pathological illness of the embodied mind contracted by contagion through invisible, spirituous vapours that travelled between lovers’ bodies and infected their minds. In the play’s final scene, Berowne, who has earlier confessed in his lovesick haze over Rosaline that it is a “plague that Cupid” has “imposed” (3.1.196–7), sums up the strange behaviour of his companions in the following way:

Bear with me, I am sick;
I’ll leave it by degrees. Soft, let us see:
Write ‘Lord have mercy on us’ on those three.
They are infected; in their hearts it lies;
They have the plague and caught it of your eyes.
These lords are visited: you are not free,
For the Lord’s tokens on you do I see. (5.2.417–23)

In comparing their affliction to the plague, he not only employs a common inscription used on the doors of quarantined houses “visited” with the disease, but invokes the contemporary name for plague sores: “tokens”. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was written in the wake of the devastating plague epidemic of 1592–93, which killed more than 17,000 people in London and resulted in extended closures of the playhouses.² In spite of Berowne’s madcap desperation, his choice of metaphor could surely not help but remind playgoers in the mid-1590s of the crude practices of confinement deployed during plague time. It also encapsulates the play’s obsessive figuring of lovesickness as a material ailment with all the deadly import of the plague itself, transferred via the senses and in the bodies and minds of its victims as a somatic infection.

For all its lighthearted conceits, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* takes lovesickness and its etiology very seriously, in ways that have been almost entirely ignored by scholarship on this play. Such representation of love as a communicable disease is drawn, I suggest, from a neoplatonic tradition led by the work of Marsilio Ficino, particularly his fifteenth-century treatise *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love*. Critics have previously addressed the play’s connections to Platonic and neoplatonic theories of love, and indeed to Ficino and his followers. Most notably, Neal L. Goldstein, in his 1974 essay “*Love’s Labour’s Lost* and the Renaissance Vision of Love”, reads the play as a satire of “Florentine Neoplatonism and Petrarchism” (Goldstein 1974, p. 336). He profitably advances an argument that the core of the play presents a mocking, negative image of Ficino’s ideal vision that love is cosmic and divine but can be achieved via earthly, sensual means.³ Such a framework has recently been furthered by Valentin Gerlier’s consideration of the play’s linking of neoplatonic conceptions of *eros* and educational philosophy. But, in examining these related ideas, neither considers love melancholy, and its more occult features, as foregrounded elsewhere in Ficino’s work and throughout *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Those who have noted lovesickness as a feature of the play, such as Daniel, have tended to position, and thus subsume, its significance in relation to the broader Galenic tradition of melancholic humoralism. Carla

Mazzio's "The Melancholy of Print" certainly takes love melancholy itself as a more serious central element of the play. While this is used to launch a dazzling reading of its representation of lovesick symptoms and how they are conflated with obsessive concerns over the fraught proliferations of language, text, and speech, any link between the play's palpitating lovers and neoplatonic conceptions of *eros* as eye-borne infection remains unacknowledged.⁴ As I will show, lovesickness is a unique, insidious, and particularly dangerous kind of contagion, reflected in the neoplatonic tradition of Ficino and his followers which regards love as a psychophysiological contaminant, and this is a recurring preoccupation in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

1. Pathological Love

The idea of love as a contagious medical condition might sound rather quaint, a poetic contrivance, the stuff of mere metaphor, but as scholars like Donald Beecher and Lesel Dawson have shown, lovesickness, otherwise known as 'erotic melancholy' or 'erotomania', was considered a real, diagnosable illness, a disease specifically of the imagination, that could be fatal if left untreated. Dawson's *Lovesickness and Gender in Early Modern English Literature* offers the most comprehensive study of the malady and its relation to period conceptions of medicine, gender, and identity, extending Beecher's foundational work to show that the pathology of lovesickness can be traced to "a multiplicity of medico-philosophical systems" (Dawson 2008, p. 19). This range of theories, though "separate and often mutually exclusive", is suggestive of a relatively cohesive set of etiological understandings of love's pathological capacity. Indeed, in an article examining "the somatogenesis of love in Renaissance medical treatises", Beecher surveys a range of texts specifically devoted to this disease. All were written by "practicing physicians", they detail "philosophical definitions" but also "diagnostic techniques and cures" and all agree "that melancholy love was a product of the humours burnt by the passions, and that all of the symptoms peculiar to lovers [. . .] could be accounted for in terms of medical pathology. All [concur] that there was a sequence of events in the body that led to a crisis, [. . .] governed entirely by processes pertaining to chronic diseases—those in which effects reinforced causes in a way that led to depression, madness, or death from physical causes" (Beecher 1988, pp. 3–4). They define lovesickness as engendering "an assault upon the brain leading to a total perversion of the imaginative and reasoning faculties" (p. 4). One of these authors, the French physician Andre du Laurens, describes the plague of love entering through the eyes, producing a defective image that takes over "the principall parts of the mind", especially the imagination, and then proceeds quickly "through the veines into the liver" and thus "doth suddenly imprint a burning desire to obtaine the thing, which is or seemeth worthy to be loved". The symptoms of the disease become apparent when the patient "is quite undone and caste away, the senses are wandring to and fro, vp and downe, reason is confounded, the imagination corrupted, the talke fond and sencelesse; the sillie louing worme cannot any more looke vpon any thing but his idol: al the functions of the bodie are likewise perverted, he becommeth pale, leane, [. . .] You shall find [them] weeping, sobbing, sighing, [. . .] avoyding company [and following their] foolish imaginations" (Du Laurens 1599, p. 118). Descriptions of the debilitating process of this contagion almost always follow a pattern: an assault on the external sense of the sight is then transferred to an infection of internal senses such as the imagination, producing humoral dissonance, and a consequent array of identifiable symptoms. As we will see, this process is clearly discernible in *Love's Labour's Lost* just as it is a feature of the view of love as *eros* in the neoplatonic tradition.

Such a perspective is certainly offered in Pierre Boaistuau's *Theatrum Mundi, The Theator or Rule of the World*, first printed and translated into English in 1566, which includes in its catalogue of "wonderfull examples, learned devices, to the overthrowe of vice, and exalting of virtue," an extended invective against the "affliction of the spirite [. . .] which is named Love". For Boaistuau, love is so virulent, so endemic a condition that he declares it should be "counted among the most grievous maladies" threatening contemporary life

in the sixteenth century, “so contagious that al the estates of the worlde doe feelee it, an evil so pestilent and venomous, that it plungeth and intermedleth among all ages indifferently, [. . .]” (Boaistuau 1566, O5r). He clearly sees this amorous epidemic as a kind of medical crisis, with love as a specifically curable disease and not merely an errant passion, as the infected “become mad and out of their wits, if they be not wel treated and medcined at the first” (O5r). If the death of Katherine’s sister in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* suggests that Shakespeare understood the more sobering consequences of love melancholy, Boaistuau is unequivocal about the disease of love’s capacity to kill: “I have seene those opened, that have died of this maladie, that had their bowels shronke, their poore heart all burned, their Liver and Lightes all [. . .] consumed, their Braines endomaged, and I thynke that their poore soule was burned by the vehement and excessive heate that they did endure, when that rage of Love had overcome them” (O5v). He thus describes being a witness to autopsies where “those opened” reveal lovesickness’s catastrophic effects on the bodies of those “that have died of this maladie”. Love’s pathology burns the heart, shrinks the bowels, damages the brain, and consumes the liver and the “Lightes” of its victims. The forensic detail Boaisteau provides here is applied to an equally comprehensive explanation of the etiology of love’s transmission:

[. . .] when we cast our sight upon that which we desire, sodenly certaine spirits that are engendred of the moste perfectest parte of blood, proceeding from the heart of the partie which we do love, and promptly ascendeth even up to the eyes, and afterwarde converteth into vapours invisible, and entreth into our eyes, which are bent to receyve them, even so as in looking in a glasse there remayneth therein some spotte by breathing, and so from the eyes it penetrateth to the heart, and so by littell and little it spreadeth all about, and therefore the miserable Lover being drawn to, by the new spirites, the which desire alwayes to joine and drawe neare, with their principall and natural habitation, is constreyned to mourne and lament his lost libertie. (O5r–O6v)

In this remarkably thorough account, love is not just a passionate state driven by internal humoural excesses it is a communicable contagion. Caused by a process external to the body it transfers between individuals as blood vapours that travel by sight. Gazing upon an object of desire triggers an instantaneous and invisible but also seemingly quite material process that starts in the heart of the beloved, sends imperceptible vapours out through their eyes and into the eyes of the victim, leaving a trace like misty breath on a mirror, before penetrating the heart and spreading “all about” to unleash scorching and all-consuming carnage on the rest of the body’s organs. ‘Love as plague’ is no mere metaphor for Boaistuau. It is a material infection, sourced from without, that gets into the body via the ever-vulnerable portal of the eyes, and then entirely transforms the body and mind, just as other deadly contagions might do. Lovesickness is not just a condition instigated by sight to which the body reacts, Boaistuau makes it abundantly clear that the body is colonized by an alien force, “by [. . .] new spirites”, as he puts it, making the affected individual thereafter reciprocally and irrevocably connected—“drawen”—to the object of their affections. Boaistuau’s model of the embodied mind is a distinctly permeable one, susceptible to profound and precipitous alteration through simply seeing a desirable person.

Boaistuau’s description of love as a somatic infection and his meticulous breakdown of its hidden etiology are sourced in part from a centuries old tradition reinvigorated by Masilio Ficino in his *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love* (initially circulated as a completed manuscript in 1469 and then first published in 1484), otherwise known as *De amore*. Ficino defines two distinct kinds of love in this work. He devotes the majority of his commentary to extolling the virtues of Socratic love, which conforms to Plato’s advocacy for a divine, transcendent love, a kind of madness in thrall to universal beauty.⁵ In the seventh and final “speech” of *De amore*, Ficino articulates a kind of love that is very much antithetical to that described in the rest of the treatise. This love is confined to the body and its internal and external senses. It is a “bestial”, “dark”, “fancy”

more akin to lust “revolv[ing] around the particular beauty of a single body” rather than “around the universal beauty of the whole human race” (Ficino 1985, p. 154). This “vulgar love”, he says, “is a certain enchantment”—“*fascinatio*” in the original Latin version, a term associated with the evil eye (Ficino 1985, p. 159).⁶ The term “lovesickness” emerged as a translation of *amor hereos*, a derivation of *amor ereos* as sourced from “Dino del Garbo’s medically oriented commentary (ca. 1311)” on Guido Calvacanti’s poem *Donna me prega* (Wells 2007, p. 20). Much was made in medieval and early modern texts of the seeming etymological resemblance of “hereos” and “hero” to the extent that the concept of “heroic love” became relatively commonplace (see Wells 2007, pp. 22–23). As Marion A. Wells explains, however, “Greek medical writers originally used the word *eros* as a quasi-technical term to denote the disease of love” and thus “[t]he term consistently denotes a pathological version of love that is distinct from ordinary *amor*” (Wells 2007, p. 22). *Eros* denotes lovesickness as a false, lustful, and “vulgar” love and Ficino emphatically considers it a kind of material contagion with the eye as its primary means of transmission.

Ficino locates this material substance of lovesickness in *pneuma* or spirit. *Pneuma* was the subtle universal vapour that hung in the *aether*. It animated and permeated the entire body through the blood and via the heart and lungs, and formed the vital communicative link between the senses, organs, and humours. Along such lines, Ficino suggests that the “spirits”, especially in younger men, are “thin and clear, warm and sweet” vapours that reside both in the heart and “the humor of the blood”. Since these vapours are “very light”, they rise up to “the highest parts of the body” and are sent out like “rays [. . .] through the eyes, which are like glass windows”. This literally causes “sparks of light” that shine out through the eyes, which, for Ficino, is a way of explaining why animals that see well at night have eyes that seem to “glow in the dark” (Ficino 1985, p. 159). As Dawson has suggested, Ficino focuses “on the act of gazing, which infects the lover and depletes his or her blood” (Dawson 2008, p. 26). The genesis of pathological love in *De amore* thus occurs through the exchange of spirits and blood vapours by eye contagion:

But the fact that a ray which is sent out by the eyes draws with it a spiritual vapor, and that this vapor draws with it blood, we observe from this that bleary and red eyes, by the emission of their own ray, force the eyes of a beholder nearby to be afflicted with a similar disease. This shows that the ray extends as far as that person opposite, and that along with the ray emanates a vapor of corrupt blood, by the contagion of which the eye of the observer is infected.

Ficino cites Aristotle to compare this process to menstruating women who “often soil a mirror with bloody drops by their own gaze”. This is because, as we saw with Boastuau’s analogy of breath spots on a mirror, the spirituous blood vapour is “so thin that it escapes the sight of the eyes, but becoming thicker on the surface of a mirror, it is clearly observed”. This works on mirrors because, unlike the porous or rough surfaces of wood, bricks, stones, or cloth, they are hard, smooth, and cold, and thus stop “the spirit on the surface [and] forces its very fine mist into droplets”. By such, Ficino is able to explain how love as eye contagion can cause what he calls a “double bewitchment”. When the vapour is shot out of one person’s heart as “poisoned dart[s]”, it pierces the eyes of another, seeks out and wounds their heart, “but in the heart’s hard back wall it is blunted and turns back into blood. This foreign blood, being somewhat foreign to the nature of the wounded man, infects his blood. The infected blood becomes sick. Hence follows a double bewitchment” (Ficino 1985, p. 160). Far from the purely metaphorical notion of love at first sight, Ficino’s explanation of love’s causation evidently regards this phenomenon as an infection spread by something that is, however subvisible, entirely material. Further confirmation of love’s status as an ontological disease spread by material substance is provided in his answer to a hypothetical criticism questioning how love could possibly contaminate and transform someone:

[. . .] so quickly, so violently, and so destructively? This will certainly not seem strange if you will consider the other diseases which arise through contagion, such as the itch, mange, leprosy, pneumonia, consumption, dysentery, pink-eye, and the plague. Indeed the amatory infection comes into being easily and becomes the most serious disease of all. (Ficino 1985, p. 162)

Ficino here includes lovesickness as part of a vast network of diseases apparently known to be contagious by invisible means. Beecher has called this statement, “an astonishing revelation, which speaks volumes about [the early modern] understanding of contagion in general” (Beecher 2005, p. 34). It is indeed remarkable that, for Ficino, exogenous contagion is the standard means of explaining the etiologies of many of the most common, often lethal, ailments of the period. In the seventh speech of *De amore*, he clearly attempts to persuade the reader that the vulgar form of love should be considered equally pathological.

Such ideas demonstrate that Ficino’s heavily influential thinking about lovesickness is sourced from a longstanding medical tradition. His explicit naming of the condition as the “amatory infection” is taken from the commentary on Cavalcanti by del Garbo, “who was himself a physician” (Ficino 1985, 176 n52). Indeed, as Wells explains, Ficino treated this form of love as a material condition of body and mind, as he “draws heavily on the medical sources with which he, as a trained physician, was quite familiar. In these works, love always threatens to become a melancholic disease, an affliction first of the body and then, inevitably, of the mind” (Wells 2007, p. 19). Furthermore, the work of Beecher and Nancy Frelick has positioned Ficino’s theory (and indeed much European thinking about love at this time) as part of a complex conflation of quasi-scientific approaches to the subject drawn from originators like Aristotle, Plato, and Galen, filtered through the interpretations of Arabic physicians like Rhazes and Avicenna, and then translated and combined with the ideals of Christianity by European physicians, poets, and clerics. This also resulted in some misnomers and slippages of definition to the extent that Frelick has suggested that lovesickness is the conceptual legacy of contagion by text: “Thus, in some ways, *amor hereos* is a disease of translation, of textual mutation and transmission” (Frelick 2005, p. 48). That kind of textual transmission also recurs in the way that such concepts, and indeed even the detailed process of lovesickness as contagion by eye-borne subtle spirits, re-appear in later texts which are not explicitly medical, like Boaistuau’s, and even, as I will show later in this essay, plays like Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.

The translation and publication of Boaistuau’s work is part of an increasing interest in the neoplatonic treatment of love during the late sixteenth century in England. As Sears Jayne has shown, while Ficino’s work arrived as early as 1500 in England it received little attention there until the late sixteenth century, consistent with a distinct English ignorance of Plato that paled in comparison to their continental neighbours: “Between 1485 and 1578 there were more than a hundred different editions of various works of Plato in France; in England during the same period, not one” (Jayne 1985, p. 21). But in 1578, Latin translations of Plato’s work and a French version of *De amore* began circulating in England, influencing Phillip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and George Chapman. This generated a slowly burgeoning English interest in *De amore*, culminating during the Caroline period in what Sears calls “a great burst of interest in all of Ficino’s works” (Jayne 1985, p. 22).

Before Ficino, however, English readers might well have been exposed to the theories about love in *De amore* through the meditation on courtly love in books three and four of Baldassarre Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528). Although it was already available in Latin, it was first printed in English translation in 1561 and republished several times, appearing again in 1577, 1588, and 1603. In the third book, which is predominantly devoted to how the courtier should regard, experience, and express love, he writes of the eyes as “trusty messengers, that may carry the ambassages of the heart: because they oftentimes declare with more force, what passion there is inwardly, then can the tongue, or letters, so that they not only disclose the thoughts, but also many times kindle love in the heart of the person beloved” (Castiglione 1561, R3v). The “kindling” of love features the same material stuff as Boaistuau and Ficino and follows a similar process of contagion:

For those lively spirits that issue out of the eyes, because they are engendred nigh the hart, entering in like case into the eyes that they are leveled at, like a shafte to the pricke, naturally pierce to the heart, as to their resting place, and there are at rest with those other spirit: And with the most subtil and fine nature of bloude which they carry with them, infect the bloude about the heart, where they are come too, & warme it: and make it like unto themselves, and apt to receive the imprinting of the image, which they have carried away with them. (Castiglione 1561, R3v-R4r)

The “subtil” blood spirits again connect the hearts of lovers, darting between eyes, but here the by-product of infection is similitude, the invading blood vapours heat and transform the blood of their new host, “mak[ing] it like unto themselves”. Now identical to the beloved, the blood of the lover converts their body and mind making it more “apt to receive the imprinting of the image”—an impression, etched on to the imagination of the victim that they “carry away with them”. Like Ficino, Castiglione sees this as a moment of reciprocal fascination, because the eyes “like sorcerers bewitch” and the exchange of “glittering beames” brings two spirits together in such a way that “the one taketh the others nature and qualitie”, which he compares to how “sore eyes” can infect sound ones with the same “disease” (Castiglione 1561, R4r). Castiglione thus takes a decidedly neoplatonic view of love in this treatise and, given its wider circulation in England, is even more likely to have inspired the depiction of lovesickness as eye contagion in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.⁷

2. Caught It of Your Eyes

The painstaking detail that Ficino, Castiglione, and Boaistuau bring to dissecting the etiology of lovesickness, capturing the way the malady is transferred from one individual to another as a pathogenic force through the eyes, demonstrates the influence of the neoplatonic view on love as a material contagion with seemingly occult power in late medieval and early modern Europe. The translation and availability of such texts is suggestive of the impact of such ideas in England during the sixteenth century. Even so, such a view was sometimes met with scepticism. In *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning* (1605), Francis Bacon argues that there are certain diseases or “distempers” of learning, each of which obstructs in its own way the “medicining of the Minde” and body he advocates in this influential treatise (Bacon 1605, p. 77). The first of these is what Bacon calls “fantastical” learning, pseudo-scientific bodies of knowledge such as natural magic and alchemy that he equates especially with the theories of the Swiss occultist and physician Theophrastus Paracelsus, whose ideas had slowly been gaining traction in England. He takes particular issue with the notion of fascination, a kind of magical belief associated with the evil eye, wherein a person or mythical beast could bewitch or enchant someone merely with the power of their gaze:

Fascinaion is the power and act of Imagination intensive upon other bodies than the bodie of the Imaginant [. . .] wherein the Schoole of Paracelsus, and the Disciples of pretended Naturall Magicke, have beene so intemperate, as they have exalted the power of the imagination, to be much one with the power of Miracle-working faith.

More sensible scientific thinkers, he suggests, “that draw nearer to Probabilitie, calling to their view the secret passages of things, and specially of the Contagion that passeth from bodie to bodie, do conceive it should likewise be agreeable to Nature, that there should be some transmissions and operations from spirit to spirit without the mediation of the senses” (Bacon 1605, p. 46). For Bacon the senses are not in control of the body; knowledge acquisition is the process by which the mind can control and even heal the body’s sensorial afflictions. About a decade earlier, Shakespeare’s comedy *Love’s Labour’s Lost* appears to suggest just the opposite, that individuals are entirely subject to infection by sense, subscribing to an understanding of a “contagion that passes from body to body” by way of the eyes. In a play obsessed with the power of the surest sense, the creation of

an academe where study is posited as the antidote to the diseases of the mind caused by worldly desire engenders an epidemic of lovesickness.

We can see an example of Bacon's thinking that "learning doth minister to all the diseases of the minde" (Bacon 1605, p. 42) in the opening speech of *Love's Labour's Lost*. The King of Navarre proposes a kind of pedagogical experiment: he and his lords, Longaville, Dumaine and Berowne, will devote themselves to three years of study, renouncing women and all sexuality, in order to achieve "honour" and "fame" (1.1.1–6). Thus, "the mind shall banquet, though the body pine" (25) and their "little academe" shall be a bulwark of defence against "the huge army of the world's desires" (10–13). The kind of wisdom or becoming-sapient later posited by Bacon will here be achieved by "study's god-like recompense" and by not setting eyes on a woman for the duration of the pact (58). In other words, as Mark Breitenberg has suggested: "Abstract, pure, disembodied philosophical knowledge—[a] privileged and decidedly masculine term—can only be obtained by the repudiation of what might be called carnal knowledge, or what the play understands as the knowledge of women" (Breitenberg 1996, p. 438). The King's plan is instantly affronted by Berowne's incisive questioning and, rather predictably, the pact is then completely derailed by the arrival at the palace gates of the Princess of France and her retinue of ladies. The ban on "seeing" ladies prompts Berowne's query, "What is the end of study, let me know?" (1.1.55). The King reveals that it is "to know which else we should not know" (56). Berowne immediately picks the flaw in the King's logic: if we are to know those "Things hid and barred from common sense," he suggests, it surely follows that if "mistresses from common sense are hid" that he will certainly "swear to study . . . where to meet some mistress fine" (57–64); and in his first foray into what will become this play's enduring preoccupation with the notion that true learning cannot come from books but only by gazing into a woman's eyes, Berowne suggests: "Study me how to please the eye indeed/By fixing it upon a fairer eye/Who dazzling so, that eye shall be his heed. And give him light that it was blinded by" (80–4). Berowne effectively paraphrases Ficino's notion of double bewitchment here and of how the eye emits vapours that are like "sparks of light" (Ficino 1985, p. 159). The use of the word "dazzle" also connects his theory precisely with the Paracelsian ideas of fascination that Bacon is at pains to discount, anticipating the plague of lovesickness that is about to be visited upon Navarre.

Even before the start of the outbreak itself, we get a kind of primer on the play's medical knowledge of lovesickness in the form of Armado, a Spanish braggart, "haunt[ing]" the "court" (160–61) of Navarre, who is described as the "child of fancy" (167) and "fashion's own knight" (176). The use of "fancy" here is usually glossed in relation to the OED definition "fantasticalness", suggesting his poetic, "vain tongue" (1.1.164) and fashionably-dressed state where this line appears as a key illustrative example of such. We soon learn though that he is "besieged with sable-coloured melancholy" (224) and having hoped to use the "health-giving air" (226) in a nearby park to cure his "black-oppressing humour" (225) he is instead struck by love at first sight. Appearing in the next scene as the very personification of indistinguishable "sadness and melancholy" (2.1.6), he declares that he is "in love with a base wench" (54), forlornly wishing that his soldier's skills could "deliver" (56) him from this "humour of affection" (55). Armado's "spirit [grew] heavy in love" the moment he "took in" the view of the "country girl" Jacquenetta (105–9). Instantly smitten, he ends up helplessly "blushing" (117) in her presence and characterizes his bewitchment as: "Love is a familiar, love is a devil. There is no evil angel but love" (153–54). His lovesick state of being thus surely also suggests that "fancy" refers to one of its other definitions relating to the imagination or "Fantasy", the "process or the faculty of forming mental representations of things not present to the senses" ("Fancy, n.4.", Oxford English Dictionary), and the part of the brain where mental impressions, 'phantasms', of the beloved became fixed.⁸ In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare 2017), the lovesick Helena is described as: "All fancy-sick she is, and pale of cheer/With sighs of love that cost the fresh blood dear" (3.2.96–7). Each "fancy-sick" sigh produced a drop of blood vapours leading to the emaciated appearance of the lover. Moth will soon pronounce Armado

as lovesickness incarnate with his constant sighing and “arms crossed on [his] thin-belly doublet like a rabbit on a spit” (3.1.14) as he slowly wastes away. His later branding as a “phantasim” (4.1.95) only continues the punning references to Armado as the embodiment of the fantastical and the lovesick. The courtiers of Navarre mock him as “our sport”, someone to entertain them and help ensure that “to study three years is but short” (1.1.178), and then they all almost immediately become victims of the same contagion.

The appearance of the French ladies at the court of Navarre provokes the spread of a sickness that consumes the men and destroys their academic repose. The attempt at quarantining themselves from the sight of women is shattered the moment they arrive at Navarre’s “forbidden gates” (2.1.26). In an attempt to ward off infection from their “fair approach”, the King tries to parley with them outside as if they are an invading army: “He rather means to lodge you in the field,/Like one that comes here to besiege his court” (85–86). The gambit fails, the quarantine sullied and their vows in jeopardy at the moment they are within view of the Lords, immediately “lodged” in their “heart” (172). Berowne, whose name suggests that he is a study in brown melancholy, is “sick at the heart” (185) almost as soon as he lays eyes on Rosaline:

BEROWNE Lady, I will commend you to mine own heart.

ROSALINE Pray you, do my commendations. I would be glad to see it.

BEROWNE I would you heard it groan.

ROSALINE Is the fool sick?

BEROWNE Sick at the heart.

ROSALINE Alack, let it blood.

BEROWNE Would that do it good?

ROSALINE My physic says ‘Ay’.

BEROWNE Will you prick’t with your eye? (179–88)

The traded barbs laced with sexual innuendo make lovesickness a joke at this point, but this moment of infection is also cloaked in medical images of bloodletting as efficacious “physic”, unwittingly anticipating the lovesick fever about to take hold. This is confirmed directly after the encounter, when Boyet describes to the Princess how the King is stricken with illness at the very sight of her:

BOYET If my observation, which very seldom lies,

By the heart’s still rhetoric disclosed with eyes

Deceive me not now, Navarre is infected.

PRINCESS With what?

BOYET With that which we lovers entitle ‘affected’.

PRINCESS Your reason?

BOYET Why, all his behaviours did make their retire

To the court of his eye, peeping thorough desire.

His heart like an agate with your print impressed,

Proud with his form, in his eye pride expressed.

His tongue, all impatient to speak and not see,

Did stumble with haste in his eyesight to be.

All senses to that sense did make their repair,

To feel only looking on fairest of fair.

Methought all his senses were locked in his eye,

As jewels in crystal, for some prince to buy,

[...]

His face’s own margin did quote such amazes

That all eyes saw his eyes enchanted with gazes. (2.1.227–46)

Boyet thus provides a detailed account of the onset of lovesickness and explicitly, recounting behaviour to which he and the audience have just been witness, constructs it as a moment of contagion by sight. Navarre is dazzled, “enchanted with gazes”, infected by simply “looking on” the Princess wherein “all his senses” become “locked in his eye”. Echoing Castiglione’s suggestion that the exchange of spirits in instances of love at first sight makes the heart “apt to receive the imprinting of the image” (Castiglione 1561, R4r), the “print” of the Princess has been “impressed” on the King’s “heart like an agate” stone used to seal wax. Navarre’s behaviour immediately exhibits the symptoms of lovesickness as he stumbles in his speech, “eye” and “tongue” collapsing into synaesthetic confusion, making a “mouth of his eye” and causing his other senses to “retire” to his eye as he gawps at the Princess, his face giving away his state of lovestruck amazement. Berowne will later confess that he too is smitten, despite scorning love, having “been love’s whip,/a very beadle to a humorous sigh” (3.1.159–60). He sardonically announces himself as now at the mercy of “Dan Cupid” (165) who is described as the “imperator” (170) of the bodily signs of lovesickness: “Regent of love-rhymes, lord of folded arms,/Th’annointed sovereign of sighs and groans” (166–67). Infected with such symptoms and pining for Rosaline, Berowne must “sigh for her [. . .] watch for her” because “it is a plague that Cupid will impose for my neglect of his mighty dreadful little might” (3.1.185–9) and that “but for her eye I would not love her” (4.3.8).⁹

At the height of the love pandemic, the lords of Navarre hit peak delusion, helplessly spouting a series of love sonnets. The lovelorn parade is observed in secret by Berowne who declares that he is “toiling in a pitch—pitch that defiles” (4.3.2), denoting Rosaline’s dark eyes, earlier described as “two pitch-balls” (3.1.182), but also Armado’s “black-oppressing humour” (1.1.225), both from which he now suffers. The sequence is filled with references to the medical understanding of lovesickness as Berowne watches “a scene of fool’ry [. . .] Of sighs, of groans, of sorrow and of teen” (4.3.160). The King decries the Princess’s “eyebeams” whose “fresh rays have smote” the tears that on his “cheeks down flows” (4.3.24–25). Longaville’s poem is, according to Berowne, “the liver vein” (69), a very embodiment of the organ, other than the heart, most associated with the disease. Dumaine’s desire for Katherine has become an unshakeable obsession: “I would forget her, but a fever she/Reigns in my blood and will remembered be” (91–92). In response, Berowne’s sarcastic aside recalls his initial encounter with Rosaline: “A fever in your blood—why then, incision/Would let her out in saucers—sweet misprision” (93–94). The remark continues the play’s association between the bodily effects of lovesickness and the medical practice of bloodletting to relieve humoral excess, here coupled with a diagnosis of Dumaine’s misapprehending imagination, a “misprision” that “mark[s] how love can vary wit” (96).

Eventually, once conscious of their collective affliction, the King is forced to ask Berowne to re-conceive their academic project with a theory of learning more in tune with their current state of being. Their failed quest to inoculate themselves in the “war against [their] own affections” (1.1.9) has instead made them into “affection’s men at arms” (4.3.285). Berowne dismantles their flawed strategy:

Consider what you first did swear unto:

To fast, to study and to see no woman—

Flat treason against the kingly state of youth.

Say, can you fast? Your stomachs are too young,

And abstinence engenders maladies. (287–291)

In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, quite contrary to Bacon’s later argument, learning produces the diseases of the mind, “abstinence engenders maladies” as Berowne himself defines it; the repression of worldly desires in the pursuit of abstract knowledge is the source of contagion in this play, renouncing sexuality only makes the men all the more susceptible to

receiving infection. In opposition to the study of “books” (293) and “other slow arts [that] entirely keep the brain” (298); he contends instead that:

Love, first learnèd in a lady's eyes
 Lives not alone immurèd in the brain,
 But with the motion of all the elements
 Courses as swift as thought in every power,
 And gives to every power a double power
 Above their functions and their offices.
 It adds a precious seeing to the eye—
 A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind.
 A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound
 When the suspicious head of theft is stopped.
 Love's feeling is more soft and sensible
 Than are the tender horns of cockled snails.
 Love's tongue proves dainty Bacchus gross in taste.
 [. . .]
 From women's eyes this doctrine I derive
 They sparkle still the right Promethean fire.
 They are the books, the arts, the academes
 That show, contain, and nourish all the world. (293–327)

Inverting the King's justification for their quarantine at the outset of the play, “not to see ladies” as the antidote to suffering the pitfalls of the “world's desires”, Berowne here posits that gazing into “a lady's eyes” is instead the source of preternatural sensory perception, as the body's “powers” receive a “double power”, far beyond “their functions and their offices”. Hearing, touching, and taste are all enhanced by love's “swift” movement beyond the brain to the externally sensing faculties, but even they are in thrall to sight, the chief sense, and the moment of contagion via the gaze is figured as a paragon of knowledge, the quintessence of understanding, bestowed with a “precious seeing” that “will gaze an eagle blind”. Only through a perverse “religion” (337) devoted to love, they decide, venerating eros and deifying “Saint Cupid” (340), can the men find salvation and deliverance. By such renewed indulgence in what was previously renounced, they vow to know themselves: “Let us once lose our oaths to find ourselves/Or else lose ourselves to keep our oaths” (335–36).

Of course, this absurdly pious pedagogy of lovesickness is but a further symptom of the disease itself, since only the infected would justify their illness in this way. And infected with eros they are, as Berowne admits: “Light wenches may prove plagues to men forsworn” (359). It provokes even more deranged behaviour when the lords agree that the solution to their predicament is to put on a play, “some entertainment” (347), where they will pose as “Muscovites” (5.2.121) and that will “woo these girls of France” (4.3.345). The French women are tipped off by Boyet, who previews the lords' rehearsal while resting beneath “the cool shade of a sycamore” (5.2.89), with a wicked pun on ‘sick amore’. They vow to deny the lords their sudden desire “to see a lady's face” (130) by donning masks and swapping “favours” (135) to confuse their suitors and greet their “disguised” (96) performance with a more effective theatrical deception. The ruse works, proving that the lords' fixations are, like their acting, but “shallow shows” (305), driven by superficial intent. A fact not lost on Berowne who acknowledges the semiotic slippage which exposed their play as mere “mockery-merriment” (138): “The ladies did change favours, and then we/Following the signs, wooed but the sign of she. Now [. . .] we are again forsworn, in will and error” (468–71). The immediacy of the heirarchised sensory faculties in which love is the product of viewing beauty through the eyes has been disrupted by the masks and

mismatched favours, and the lords “woo but the sign” of their beloved, revealing that their love is but lovesickness.¹⁰

In the wake of the lament for the deadly love that killed Katherine’s sister, the ensuing scene of histrionic hijinks “begins to cloud” (704) at the news of another death: the Princess’s father, instantly elevating her to Queen of France. Like the closure of playhouses during a plague epidemic, the sobering reality of the monarch’s death, and his daughter’s “griefs” (734), brings the entertainment to an abrupt halt. It prompts in Berowne “plain words” (736) of self-reflection:

For your fair sakes have we neglected time,
 Played foul play with our oaths. Your beauty, ladies,
 Hath much deformed us, fashioning our humours
 Even to the opposed end of our intents
 And what in us hath seemed ridiculous—
 As love is full of unbefitting strains,
 All wanton as a child, skipping and vain,
 Formed by the eye and therefore like the eye,
 Full of strange shapes, of habits and of forms
 Varying in subjects as the eye doth roll
 To every varied object in his glance;
 Which part-coloured presence of loose love
 Put on by us, if in your heavenly eyes
 Have misbecomed our oaths and gravities,
 Those heavenly eyes that look into our faults
 Suggested us to make them. (737–52)

The detailed self-diagnosis re-invokes Berowne’s earlier pronouncement of the plague of lovesickness’s visitation on the lords of Navarre, an infection “caught” of the French ladies’ “eyes”. Here he dissects the ways in which the affliction “deformed” their “humours”, overtook their “intents”, and perverted their behaviour. He suggests the neoplatonic idea of love simultaneously infecting and “formed by” their eye but also transforming their being into that sense’s optical capriciousness: taking in “strange shapes” as it “doth roll/To every varied object in his glance”. Asking the women to see that the same “heavenly eyes” with which they perceive their “faults” were also the cause of the contagion, Berowne’s twisted logic suggests that since the lords have been “once false” to themselves, they will thus be forever “true/To those that make us both—fair ladies, you.” (755–56). This rationale does not wash and, in response to the King’s seeming marriage proposal, the Queen suggests that this period of courtship has been “too short” for such a “world-without-end bargain” (770–71). Instead, she posits that the King prove his love by re-invoking the oath made at the play’s beginning:

Your oath I will not trust, but go with speed
 To some forlorn and naked hermitage
 Remote from all the pleasures of the world.
 There stay until the twelve celestial signs
 Have brought about their annual reckoning.
 If this austere, insociable life
 Change not your offer made in heat of blood;
 If frosts and fasts, hard lodging and thin weeds
 Nip not the gaudy blossoms of your love,
 But that it bear this trial and last love,

Then at the expiration of a year
 [. . .]
 I will be thine, and till that instance shut
 My woeful self up in a mourning house,
 Raining the tears of lamentation
 For the remembrance of my father's death. (776–92)

The Queen's proposal is a kind of double quarantine, recapitulating Navarre's initial vow for a renewed (albeit shorter) stint "remote from all the pleasures of the world", as a cure for two fraught emotional states: his lovesickness and her grief. In so doing, she demands that the King verify that his *amor hereos*, made in the "heat of blood", in Ficino's formulation, is not the kind of vulgar love, borne of lust, fascination, and enchantment, but something purer, a "last[ing] love" that will stand the test of privation and "austere, insociable life". The ladies confirm that they expect the same of the other wooing lords, especially Rosaline who suggests to Berowne that this "twelvemonth term" (827) is needed "to weed this wormword from your fruitful brain" (824). He is to "visit the speechless sick" and "converse/With groaning wretches", presumably as a means to purge his own groaning, sickly love.

The treatment of lovesickness with quarantine returns the play to its founding concerns: overcoming errant desire through denial and isolation. Navarre's academic project failed because Berowne was right, "abstinence engenders maladies", and now that sickness has become so overwhelming that it can, ironically, only be cured by a new period of restraint. The quarantine effectively delays any conventional ending, and thus the normative social and patriarchal functions of Shakespearean comedy are disrupted by lovesickness. As Gerlier has suggested, by way of Northrop Frye, comic marriages present the "triumph of love" as both generative "rebirth" and a challenge to the social order: "The rules of comedic form seem to call for a fruitfully paradoxical situation of *serio ludere*, in which *eros* is at once transcendent, offering a glimpse of eternity through love and the beloved, and yet world-affirming, in the social rebirth generated on stage: it both challenges *and* reconstitutes community. As is well known, however, this does not occur at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*" (Gerlier 2019, p. 593). The conundrum is affirmed in the form of a metatheatrical joke:

BEROWNE Our wooing doth not end like an old play.
 Jack hath not Jill. These ladies' courtesy
 Might well have made our sport a comedy.
 KING Come, sir, it wants a twelvemonth an' a day,
 And then twill end.
 BEROWNE That's too long for a play.

In this moment of hilarious but also intense self-awareness the characters recognise that the expected ending has not just been thwarted, "comedy" itself has been undermined, threatening its generic boundaries and further emphasising the serious consequences of *eros* when manifested as an epidemic of lovesickness.

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Notes

¹ All citations of *Love's Labour's Lost* refer to the Arden 3rd series version edited by H. R. Woudhuysen (Shakespeare 1998).

- ² See Barroll (1991) for a detailed account of the correlation between plague epidemics and playhouse closures.
- ³ A more positive reading of neo-Platonic love in *Love's Labour's Lost* and its connection to Ficino's *De amore* can be seen in Jill Line's *Shakespeare and the Fire of Love* (Line 2004; see especially pp. 10–13). Line does not consider the idea of lovesickness in the play.
- ⁴ See Mazzio (2000). Neely (2000) has offered a more significant take on lovesickness and gender in two other Shakespearean comedies, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*. Here lovesickness is treated as a legitimate and somatic infection in both medical discourse and the plays, though there is almost no consideration of the neoplatonic and only marginal mentions of eye-borne infection. Dawson (2008) examines a plethora of dramatic and literary examples of the treatment of this disease in medical terms, extensively examines neoplatonism, and offers some consideration of lovesickness as eye contagion, in ways that dovetail with my own evidence and arguments. Curiously, *Love's Labour's Lost* warrants only a short summary (see p. 33) and is not considered in relation to such ideas.
- ⁵ For an extended explanation of heroic and universal ideas of love in Plato and Ficino see Wells (2007, pp. 1–7).
- ⁶ See Ficino (1985, p.159 n.42) for Sears Jayne's explanation of the translation of *fascinatio*.
- ⁷ For a complementary, but also more wide-ranging, consideration of lovesickness and neoplatonism, including Castiglione's use of this tradition, see Dawson (2008, pp. 127–62).
- ⁸ For a thorough reading of the status of imagination and fantasy in *Love's Labour's Lost*, see Roychoudhury (2018, pp. 56–82).
- ⁹ For an extended examination of sighing as a key symptom of lovesickness, see Chalk (2021).
- ¹⁰ As Goldstein (1974, p. 344) states of this scene: "The mistaken identities and the misdirected declarations of love point out clearly the despiritualization of love in the world of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Without markers apprehensible to the senses, none of the courtiers of Navarre is able to recognize his beloved, and each swears his oaths to the wrong woman".

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