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**NOT MOVING A FOOT: THE DANCEFLOOR AS AN AMOROUS
BATTLEGROUND IN *LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST***

BY

VALENTINA FINGER

In his 1538 manual *The Education of a Christian Woman*, the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives includes a brief chapter “On Dancing.” It is “an activity,” he acknowledges, “in which many women find great delight and which they are taught with great diligence even by their parents” (139). For Vives, quoting Cicero, however, public dancing as “the final escort of dinner parties,” which frequently takes place “in attractive surroundings and amidst all sorts of sensuous delights,” is simply “the culmination of all vices” (140). The worst of all customs, he continues, referring in all likelihood to the medieval folk tradition of mumming plays, is the “recent institution for men and women to run about the city wearing masks [and] dancing in famous houses” (142). Under those masks, particularly under the masks worn by women, he complains, “many shameful things are concealed” (142):

Then female shamelessness is given free rein. A woman who would be ashamed to go out and dance if she were known is not afraid to do so when she is masked, and consequently there is no respect for age, social status, fortune, or reputation in those circumstances. Not only do they hear obscenities and things unworthy of them, but they say fearlessly what they would not dare to think if they were recognized. But a mask levels everything in the eyes of the beholder as if darkness were cast around them. Thus little by little they become used to shamelessness so that the harm that modesty suffered under the mask is now flaunted and displayed without the mask. (142–43)

According to Vives and several of his contemporaries,¹ dancing and masking are infamously intertwined. Women who mask and dance are inclined to behave immodestly. Even worse, these critics fear, women become habituated to their masked behaviour, soon pursuing such indecencies in an unmasked state as well. While the anonymity under the mask is reputed to encourage violence in men, for women, as Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter note in their study on masking culture in medieval and early Tudor England, “fears of social disorder centre not on violence but on sex” (309). Since female maskers “are seen as having little defence against the combination of traditional licence, anonymity and excitement that masking involves” (309), they are suspected of frequently indulging in promiscuous behaviour. From an early modern perspective, then,

¹ In his *Anatomie of Abuses* (first published in 1583), the Puritan Phillip Stubbes voices similar concerns about the inappropriate behaviour of masked women who “prophane the name of God, and live in all kinde of voluptuousnesse and pleasure” (42v). He later, in his chapter on “The horrible Vice of pestiferous dauncing,” likewise condemns the act of dancing as “an introduction to whordome, a preparative to wantonnesse, a provocative to uncleanesse, & an introite to all kind of lewdnesse” (98r).

masking and masked dancing can make women who participate in such activities willing prey for men on the hunt for a lover.

The female maskers in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* counter these expectations. They strictly refuse to conform to the courting conventions of their culture, dismissing their wooers without having made any clear commitments with regards to marriage or sexual pairing. Throughout the masked-ball scene in act five, and contrary to any rules of courtly conduct, the ladies also repeatedly decline the male maskers' offers to dance. Their refusal to get involved in potentially sexually charged dancing might at first appear to be in line with social norms that condemn suchlike "allurementes and allections to sinne, (as Dauncing is)" (Stubbes 98–99). However, in fact quite the opposite is true, since the women in the play make no move to appeal to the ideal of the silent and submissive role of the unmarried virgin that Vives also describes in his manual. Instead, as I am going to argue in this paper, by not moving a foot towards the dancefloor and instead deliberately confusing male expectations in the course of a sophisticated masking game, the female characters successfully bend gender hierarchies and emerge the winners of the amorous war of the sexes that the play represents.

Love's Labour's Lost is a comedy that deals with the confusion of signs and the inversion of lead-follow relationships. While there are other plays in the Shakespeare canon that feature identities mistaken due to the wearing of masks, this is the only drama in which female characters put on and take off their masks on stage (whereas, e.g., in *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet enters with the other masquers in 1.4 and in 2.1 re-enters, it is safe to assume, without her mask on, female masking and unmasking are off-stage activities). Playing on and at the same time challenging the prevailing prejudice of "the fundamental duplicity of women" (Howard 37), the play exhibits women wittily deploying what may be called their double-faced femininity in order to expose the superficiality of the male gaze.

The female challenge to power structures in *Love's Labour's Lost* takes place in the light of what is known as the early modern crisis of representation. In his study of carnivalesque masquerade in Shakespearean comedy, Andreas Mahler identifies such a crisis as a symptom of a period of intensified self-fashioning processes, when exteriors no longer provide reliable significant and individuals are frequently faced with society's semiotic disorder. A symptomatic unreliability of the significant undermines a presumed readability of the world. As a consequence, signifiers and signified become increasingly separated and social signs, Mahler argues, are turned into a "mass of floating material freely disposable to create customised identities" (120, my translation).²

In the play, the confusion of identities is the result of the Princess of France's scheme to counter the King and courtiers of Navarre's own, previously uncovered, plot to woo her and her ladies by means of disguise. The entire female undertaking rests upon the conviction that the men in the play still believe in outer appearances as stable markers of identity. Aware of the conservatism behind the men's world view, the Princess instructs her followers: "The gallants shall be tasked; / For, ladies, we will everyone be masked; / And not a man of them shall have the grace, / Despite of suit, to see a lady's

² The German original reads "freie Verfügungsmasse individueller Aneignung" (Mahler 120).

face” (5.2.126–9).³ Her plan, however, not only involves masks as barricades against male attempts at face-reading, but also a disturbance of other semiotic processes. While the wooers intend to identify their ladies “by favours several which they did bestow” (5.2.125), the ladies interchange their tokens in order to temporarily change roles. In their preparations for the encounter, the men only focus on the material signifiers brooch, pendant, pearls and glove because in the male imagination woman and token, subject and object, appear indistinguishable. Proactively swapping tokens and identities, the ladies play on this superficiality, thus clearly rejecting any claims of ownership that the men’s bestowment of favours might imply.

As H. R. Woudhuysen writes in his introduction to the Arden edition of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, the male characters in the play instinctively rely on an inconstant theory of signs, “with language as a system of signs and with signs as a system of language for which clothes and disguise [...] supply parallel systems” (24). As a visual mode of communication (the fashion theorist Ingrid Loschek calls sartorial behaviour a “symbolic language” [“Symbolsprache”, 25]), the act of dressing creates codes that have to be deciphered and that are always subject to cultural and historical change. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, women who altered their appearances by painting or masking their faces were the target of severe criticism voiced in treatises, sermons and literary works.⁴ Negotiating suchlike debates on female mutability, Shakespeare’s play features male voices that presume and demand “fixed meaning,” while the women understand “that these outward signs are interchangeable” (Woudhuysen 23). When both parties meet again with their faces unmasked and the female stratagem uncovered, the King, however, is still convinced that he argued with the Princess and not, as he in fact did, with Rosaline who had adopted the Princess’s token and role. While the King insists that he “knew her [the Princess] by this jewel on her sleeve” (5.2.456), his courtier Biron eventually realises the men’s fault as their misinterpretation of the signs worn by their female counterparts:

I see the trick on’t. Here was a consent,
 Knowing aforehand of our merriment,
 To dash it like a Christmas comedy.
 Some carry-tale, some please-man, some slight zany,
 Some mumble-news, some trencher-knight, some Dick,
 That smiles his cheek in years and knows the trick
 To make my lady laugh when she’s disposed,
 Told our intents before, which, once disclosed,
 The ladies did change favors, and then we,
 Following the signs, wooed but the sign of she. (5.2.461–70)

Biron acknowledges that he and his comrades, not recognising the woman beneath, simply focused on what he calls “the sign of she.” His speech, moreover, identifies the

³ All quotations from Shakespeare’s plays refer to the Norton Shakespeare edition (2016).

⁴ Some notable and widely read contributions to the anti-cosmetics discourse of the period include Thomas Tuke’s *Discourse Against Painting and Tincturing of Women* (1616) and John Gauden’s *Discourse of Auxiliary Beauty* (1656). Other texts, like Stubbes’ *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), Baldassare Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* (first published in Italian in 1528, English translation 1561), and John Downname’s *Four Treatises* (1608), also include critique on female face-painting.

proceedings of the masked ball as both “merriment” and “comedy,” indicating carnival and theatrical performances alike. Earlier in the play, Biron refers to masked courtship as some “strange pastime” featuring “revels, dances, masques, and merry hours” (4.3.372–4). Involving various forms of the period’s popular, dramatic, and courtly entertainments, all of which include interludes of masking and dancing, Biron’s speech introduces the wide range of associations present in the masked-ball scene. Borrowing another term from the theatrical context by blaming “some slight zany” (5.2.464), the jester of the *commedia dell’arte* tradition, for spoiling their wooing enterprise, Biron unknowingly addresses the Princess’s attendant Boyet, who in a multi-layered eavesdropping scene overheard the men discussing their plan to woo the women in disguise. When, early in the masked-ball scene, Boyet returns to share this information, his choice of words is of particular significance:

Prepare, madam, prepare!
 Arm, wenches, arm! Encounters mounted are
 Against your peace. Love doth approach disguised,
 Armed in arguments – you’ll be surprised!
 Muster your wits; stand in your own defense;
 Or hide your heads like cowards and fly hence. (5.2.81–6)

Heralding “mounted encounters” that approach “armed in arguments” on a mission “against peace” and calling on the women to “prepare” either for defense or flight, Boyet’s announcement turns the amorous encounter into an ‘*armourous*’ confrontation. So, too, right from the beginning of the play, the verb ‘arm’ repeatedly characterises the undertakings of the opposite party whenever the relationship between the sexes is addressed. From the King’s declaration of “[t]hat war against our own affections” (1.1.9) in the opening scene, the triad of dance, love and war runs through the drama, turning the dancefloor of the masked-ball scene into a battlefield of love affairs. The men’s war *against* their own affections is soon transformed into a war motivated *by* their affections, the aim of which is to win the affections of the women. Having learned of each other’s enamoured state, Biron addresses his fellow courtiers as “[a]ffection’s men-at-arms” (4.3.284) before his enthusiasm culminates in a battle cry (“*Via!* We will do’t, come what will come!” [5.2.112]). The King embraces the plan to woo the ladies disguised as Muscovites and strikes out with a similar warlike appeal to his followers, which bears a remarkable resemblance to the “Once more unto the breach” speech of Shakespeare’s warrior king, Henry V (“Saint Cupid, then! And, soldiers, to the field!”), 4.3.361).⁵

‘Visor’ is the term preferably used to refer to the men’s face covering in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (5.2.228, 243, 247, 272, 386–8, 405). In the language of the early modern period, this could also refer to a “helmet-piece.”⁶ When the wooers approach with their

⁵ In *Henry the Fifth*, the king, aiming at inciting his soldiers’ combative spirit, famously ends the first of his motivation speeches in front of the city gates of Harfleur exclaiming: “Follow your spirit, and upon this charge / Cry, ‘God for Harry! England and Saint George!’” (3.1.33–34).

⁶ A comprehensive analysis of the several appearances of the words ‘visor’ and ‘vizard’ in Shakespeare’s plays shows that these terms generally tend to denote male acts of disguise while ‘masking’ usually refers to moments of female masquerade. The martial, and therefore ‘masculine,’ connotation of the visor as a piece of armour offers a potential explanation for these findings.

visors on, the women, on Boyet's command ("The trumpet sounds. Be masked! The maskers come!" [5.2.157]), put on their own masks. This, in turn, may be read as a clear echo of how soldiers in preparation for battle would shut their visors. Indeed, the association of an amorous state of mind with an armed face not only exists from an etymological perspective. It also, as Twycross and Carpenter prove in their study, has its origins in the courtly entertainment culture of the Tudor era:

Although a helmet visor and a disguising mask, like an armed combat and a courtly dance, may seem entirely different at a distance of five centuries, we have seen the intricate overlap between the courtly performance games of tournament and disguising. In the context of medieval and Tudor court entertainment the act of covering the face, for whatever ostensible reason, seems to unsettle any sense of firm division between the martial, theatrical, and amorous presentation of the self, making the particular referent of the term *viser* sometimes genuinely indistinguishable. (329)

With respect to sexual competition, masks, similar to face-paints as beautifying devices, may be considered as playful forms of "*female arming*" (Maguire 74, emphasis in original). Fittingly, in his seminal study on *The Psychology of Clothes*, J. C. Fluegel introduces what he terms the "terrorising" motif of bodily decoration. Masks and war paint, he notes, are "a natural accompaniment of war dances and other forms of military ceremonial" (30). In the play, the women's black-velvet masks (made, according to Biron, of "rich taffeta", 5.2.159) are certainly not the "grotesque or ferocious masks" that Fluegel refers to for his purpose (30). Nevertheless, these masks still have the potential to undermine male agency. "A veil or a vizard [...], like cosmetics," Sujata Iyengar remarks in her book on skin colour in early modern England, "can deceive men's eyes and return a degree of control to women over the image they present to others" (128).

The situation of a masked ball, Fluegel writes elsewhere in his study, "permits of less restrained expression of certain tendencies, notably the erotic ones, than is otherwise possible," whereas an unmasked guest might "feel a distinct disadvantage in talking to a masked person" (51–52). Both male and female attendees are physically masked in Shakespeare's play. However, the ladies have uncovered the identities of their suitors even before their physical encounter. This puts them, in Fluegel's terms, in the advantageous position of the masked person facing an unmasked and ignorant other. Rosaline, arranging the re-encounter with the male maskers in their unmasked shapes, stresses her party's lead in amorous combat due to their lead in knowledge:

Let's mock them still, as well known as disguised.
 Let us complain to them what fools were here,
 Disguised like Muscovites in shapeless gear,
 And wonder what they were, and to what end
 Their shallow shows, and prologue wiley penned,
 And their rough carriage so ridiculous
 Should be presented at our tent to us. (5.2.302–8)

To "mock" the men is central to the women's plot in the play. The temporary licence and inversion of gendered hierarchies achieved through the deliberate confusion of identities endows the atmosphere of the masked ball with certain traits that Mikhail Bakhtin qualifies as aspects of the carnivalesque. In Bakhtin's pioneering work on car-

nival and the grotesque in the writings of François Rabelais, he identifies the link between carnivalesque mockery and the wearing of masks. The mask, he writes,

is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to *mockery* and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of most ancient rituals and spectacles. (39–40, my emphasis)

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, mockery by means of masquerade is part of the carnivalesque element of the play. The term 'mock,' intrinsically linked to carnivalesque inversion, is repeated almost obsessively throughout the lines leading up to the masked encounter. The ladies themselves define their strategy as a mocking of their male suitors. "We are wise girls to mock our lovers so" (5.2.58), the Princess asserts and Rosaline affirms: "They are worse fools to purchase mocking so" (5.2.59). From the Princess's perspective, the female scheme is designed to foil the men's "mocking merriment" (5.2.139) by "mocking intended game" with the expected result that "they, well mocked, depart away with shame" (5.2.155–56). "And mock for mock is only my intent. / Their several counsels they unbosom shall / To loves mistook, and so be mocked withal / Upon the next occasion that we meet, / With visages displayed, to talk and greet" (5.2.140–44), she sums up her plan. Later, Longueville rebukes Katherine for her "sharp mocks" (252) and when the King eventually realises that they are indeed fooled by the masked ladies he exclaims: "We are descried! They'll mock us now downright" (5.2.390).

Mocking their "shapeless gear," "shallow shows," "wiley penned" prologue and "rough carriage" as "ridiculous," the women's unmasking of the men is turned into an unmaning. While conventionally female bodies are objectified as territories to be captured, the women in the play use verbal attacks to rob their suitors of their self-perception as amorous conquerors. When Katherine asks Longueville whether his visor was "made without a tongue" (5.2.243), she thus not only refers to the type of mask he supposedly wears to the ball,⁷ but also triumphantly registers his silence as a reaction to her sharp repulses of his sexual advances.

It is possible to view the female masquerade in *Love's Labour's Lost* as related to the twin character that Roger Caillois ascribes to *le loup*, the black or half-mask, elegantly reduced in style and rather abstract in shape, and worn by maskers and conspirators alike. Associated both with erotic festivities and conspiratorial activities, *le loup* signifies what Caillois in his influential study *Man, Play and Games* terms "equivocally sensual intrigues" and "mysterious plots against the powers that be" (130):

It is the symbol of amorous or political intrigue. [...] At a ball, it is not merely two strangers who hold and dance with each other; they are two beings who symbolize mystery and who are already bound by a tacit promise of secrecy. The mask ostensibly liberates them from social constraints. In a world in which sexual relationships are subject to many taboos, it is noteworthy that the black mask [...] traditionally symbolizes the means and often the announced decision to violate these taboos. (130–31)

⁷ The Arden edition notes that Katherine is likely to refer to a type of mask that "covered the entire features and was kept in place by a tongue, or interior projection, held in the mouth" (5.2.245n.).

Due to the gender hierarchies dominating social interactions in early modern England, the relationship of men and women is both sexually and politically charged. In the play, the female masking game combines amorous and political intrigue in an attempt to challenge masculine authority. On a further level, the play's portrayal of "amorous masking" (Twycross and Carpenter 170) in the sense of a highly stylised and hierarchised form of courtly dance is turned into an allusive microcosm of social structures and hierarchies. The dancefloor of the masked ball becomes a representation of gendered society. By teasingly violating codes of conduct and etiquette in dancing, the women thus undermine the men's sexual and political power.

In that respect, *Love's Labour's Lost* differs remarkably from Shakespeare's other plays involving amorous masking. In *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Henry the Eighth*, the male characters, in keeping with the conventions of the period, "see masking as a socially accepted opportunity to survey the looks and enjoy the company of young women" (Twycross and Carpenter 4). The masking behaviour of the historical king Henry the Eighth, considered to have initiated the English masque tradition, is said to have gone along with his amorous desire. In 1537–38, the Emperor's ambassador Eustace Chapuys noted in a letter that "he [the king] cannot be one single moment without masks, which is a sign that he purposes to marry again" (qtd. in Twycross and Carpenter 179). Accordingly, in the play of his name, a disguised Henry the Eighth indeed falls in love with Anne Boleyn while dancing with her after having crashed a social gathering at Cardinal Wolsey's house. In conformity with the popular courtly masque fiction of an embassy that appears in order to dance with the local nobles (Schnitzer 50), the monarch and his fellow maskers stage themselves as "a noble troop of [French] strangers" (1.4.53) sent to act "as great ambassadors / From foreign princes" (1.4.55–56), who "[c]rave leave to view these ladies and entreat / An hour of revels with 'em" (1.4.71–72).

The arrival of the king and his followers outlandishly "*habited like shepherds*" is heralded by Lord Chamberlain (1.4.63, stage directions) who takes the traditional part of the presenter of the masque. In this respect, the maskers in *Henry the Eighth* parallel the performance of the men in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The latter similarly appear outlandishly "appareled [...] / Like Muscovites or Russians" (5.2.120–21), attended by "*Black[a]moors with music*" (5.2.117, stage directions) and finally heralded by the page Mote, who declares their aim as "to parley, to court, and dance" (5.2.122). At first sight, the fiction of a group of foreigners invading the dancefloor in order to court native ladies invokes the common idea of male colonial penetration of feminised terrain, which might also hint at anxieties concerning "the permeability of England's borders" (Karim-Cooper 43). In *Love's Labour's Lost*, however, this constellation is inversed in two respects. Not only are the male invaders forced to withdraw from the battleground without any notable triumph, but the women, as French ambassadors to the court of Navarre, are in fact themselves the party to first invade a foreign country. With their arrival shortly after the self-styled "brave conquerors" (1.1.8) declared "not to see a woman" (1.1.37), the ladies, as soldieresses of "the huge army of the world's desires" (1.1.10) that the King was determined to fight, eventually shame the men publicly according to their own vow by bringing the royal proclamation to bear: "Item: If any

man be seen to talk with a woman within the term of three years, he shall endure such public shame as the rest of the court shall possibly devise” (1.1.128–30).

In this comedy, the significance of female masking provides a crucial break from amorous masking conventions as staged in other plays in which, with some minor exceptions,⁸ only men perform with their faces covered by masks. Twycross and Carpenter identify a flirtatious “interaction of masked and unmasked participants” (13) as essential to the erotic charge of the amorous masking tradition:

A masker encounters an unmasked partner: the flirtation they engage in is shaped partly by the power held by the masker, who can see the other withholding his [...] own identity, and partly by the excitement of the unmasked partner at engaging in amorous exploration with the literally, or supposedly, unknown. (171)

The women in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* oppose this custom and also refuse to participate in other conventions of festive display at court. As soon as the men appear in order to act as Muscovites in the performance they devised for the purpose of wooing, the ladies do not grant them any audience. When Mote sets out to herald their arrival, “[t]he ladies turn their backs to him” (5.2.161, stage directions). When he eventually starts to speak, the women’s repudiating behaviour causes him to confuse his lines:

PAGE “A holy parcel of the fairest dames
That ever turned – [...] their backs to mortal views.”
BIRON Their “eyes,” villain, their “eyes”!
PAGE “That ever turned their eyes to mortal views. [...]”
[...] They do not mark me, and that brings me out! (5.2.160–73)

From the outset, the male performance, originally designed to win over the ladies, is deprived of any authority and attention. Usually, however, masks are meant to act as “public faces” (Twycross and Carpenter 92). Every masked person, as Richard Weihe points out in his study on the paradoxicality of the mask, needs an audience as hiding one’s face behind a mask, paradoxically, implies a desire to be seen (17). By “turning their backs to” and not looking at the maskers, the women deny the key component of any masked encounter.

When they finally look at their suitors, their behaviour only intensifies their refusal to adhere to courtly masque conventions. Questioned about the intention of their visit, the King declares that he and his fellow Muscovites “have measured many miles / To tread a measure” (5.2.185–86) with the ladies. The implicit notion that the women will have to dance because the men expect them to do so expresses the deeply ingrained and repeatedly implied male desire to stick to traditional lead-follow relationships. “Then in our measure vouchsafe but one change. / Thou bidd’st me beg; this begging is not strange” (5.2.210–11), the King further urges Rosaline, whom he takes for the Princess because she wears the Princess’s token. On a similar note, he also entreats her to take off her mask in order “to show the sunshine of [her] face” (5.2.202), again expressing

⁸ In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet indeed wears a mask to the Capulets’ “ancient feast” (1.4.85), but her disguise does not counter the male expectations of the occasion (with the possible objection that she accepts the wooing of another man than the one chosen by her father as her future husband).

his wish to maintain gendered hierarchies between masked male dancers and unmasked female dancers on the dancefloor.

Rosaline, commanding in the role of the Princess, however, rejects all of his requests. Already earlier in the play, in her very first dialogue with Biron, Rosaline pointedly refuses to answer and mockingly parrots Biron's question about a dance the pair shared in the past ("Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?", 2.1.114–15). Now, again asked for a dance, she refers to her masked face as a "clouded" moon (5.2.204), itself a traditionally feminised natural force not to be commanded by human powers, and calls for music without intention to "tread a measure": "Play music, then! Nay, you must do it soon. / Not yet? No dance! Thus change I like the moon" (212–13). Still insisting on his manliness as an imperative force, the King declares himself the man in the moon (i.e. the master over Rosaline disguised as the Princess), thus entitled to demand "some motion" to the music (5.2.216–17), while Rosaline, however, continues to challenge male expectations. "Since you are strangers, and come here by chance, / We'll not be nice. Take hands," she seemingly relents, only to immediately revoke her offer and repeat her initial refusal ("We will not dance", 5.2.220). "Why take you hands, then?" wonders the King, unable to make sense of her behaviour. Wittily manipulating the meaning of bodily signs, Rosaline explains their handshake to be a gesture of parting (5.2.221). Finally prompting her ladies to curtsy in order to signify that "so the measure ends" (5.2.222), Rosaline eventually frustrates the men's wish to dance once and for all by granting them only a concluding gesture without the fulfilment of the actual act.

Declining to dance at a masked ball in early modern England comes close to a refusal to engage in any form of communication. As Twycross and Carpenter point out: "With changing facial expression unavailable as a source of communication, masking activities often prioritise other sources of bodily expression. Courtly masking almost always centres on dance" (8). With respect to the masque's conventions, the French ladies' behaviour represents a sort of scandal. In fact, both parties repeatedly hint at the anomalous character of the situation. "But shall we dance if they desire us to't?" (5.2.145), Rosaline wants to know when the ladies prepare for their mocking of the male maskers. Immediately, however, she is met with resolute negation on the part of the Princess as the leader of the female rebellion: "No, to the death we will not move a foot; / Nor to their penned speech render we no grace, / But while 'tis spoke each turn away her face" (5.2.146–48). Accordingly, for the King, the women's refusal to dance makes them appear "estranged" (5.2.214). From an early modern male perspective, then, the physical distancing forced on the men belies expectations regarding the appropriate conduct of women in general and of noble women sticking to etiquette in particular.

Finally recognising their defeat and realising the ineffectiveness of any further urging ("More measure of this measure! Be not nice", 5.2.223), the King relents to relinquish dancing and to settle for conversation instead. "If you deny to dance, let's hold more chat" (5.2.229), he concedes before the couples withdraw to converse in private. Later, Biron, on behalf of his comrades, promises Rosaline that he "will wish [her] never more to dance, / Nor ever more in Russian habit wait" (5.2.401–2). After their plan to win the ladies with masks and dances failed, the men's wooing is moved entirely to the sphere of language. Their impotency to actually match actions to words is implied even before the masked-ball scene in act five. Starting from the King's failure to meet the terms of

his own proclamation of celibacy in the very first scene,⁹ the play eventually returns to its point of departure, with each lady imposing on her wooer a twelve-months period of “reformation” (5.2.857). “Our wooing doth not end like an old play: / Jack hath not Jill,” Biron remarks in his final lines in the play, acknowledging that “[t]hese ladies’ courtesy / Might well have made [their] sport a comedy” (5.2.862–4). Not able to perform as promised and to put any of their plans into practice, the men finally accept the effective inversion of gendered lead and follow positions.

Not only are the men unable to engage in dancing, but throughout the play they also fail to perform another crucial sort of stylised movement. In the play’s subplot, from the first reference to the conflict unfolding between Armado and Costard, who are both amorously linked to the country maid Jaquenetta, the masculinity-affirming ritual of duelling is repeatedly evoked, but never performed. When Costard’s case (he violated the royal proclamation of celibacy) is brought before the King, the culprit pictures himself as “a man that dares not fight” (1.1.221). Thus, he is content with renouncing his affair with Jaquenetta as long as he will not have to bear any heavy penalty. Armado in turn, who is tasked with having custody of Costard, admits that he is himself entangled in an amorous war against his feelings. Aware that “drawing [his] sword against the humour of affection” (1.1.54–55) will not deliver him from his desire, Armado acknowledges his defeat by the armed forces of sexual attraction:

Cupid’s butt-shaft is too hard for Hercules’ club, and therefore too much odds for a Spaniard’s rapier. The first and second cause will not serve my turn. The *passado* he respects not; the *duello* he regards not. His disgrace is to be called “Boy,” but his glory is to subdue men. Adieu, valor; rust, rapier; be still, drum: for your manager is in love. (1.1.157–63)

Armado’s use of the language of duelling as a highly encoded and ritualised form of male toe-to-toe confrontation, is later combined with the sphere of dancing. When Mote wants to know whether Armado means to “win [his] love with a French brawl,” referring, according to the Norton editor, to a French dance, Armado, mistaking this meaning, only wonders what he means by “[b]rawling in French” (3.1.7–8). His own use of ‘brawling’ in this line signifies ‘quarrelling’ rather than actually ‘brawling’ in the sense of French dancing (3.1.8, 4n). Mote finally corrects him, explaining that by ‘brawl’ he meant “to jig off a tune at the tongue’s end, canary to it with the feet, humor it with turning up your eyes, sigh a note and sing a note” (3.1.9–11). As these few lines imply, the triad of love, dance and war subsists in the subplot of the play. The nobles’ formal language of warfare and the aristocratic masque of the main plot reappear in the world of the commoners, albeit in a transformed shape. Here, brawling is used as a less sophisticated standardised form of fighting, and the masque is substituted by other more appropriate forms of popular entertainments, a tune and a canary dance.

⁹ After rereading the King’s agreement regarding the courtiers’ three-years celibate enclosure for academic studies, Biron, recalling the scheduled arrival of the female French ambassadors, remarks on the rule of “not seeing woman”: “This article, my liege, yourself must break. / For well you know, here comes in embassy / The French King’s daughter with yourself to speak [...]. / Therefore, this article is made in vain, / Or vainly comes th’admired Princess hither” (1.1.131–8). When he finally signs the document, he, prognostically, proclaims that “he that breaks them [i.e. the regulations] in the least degree / Stands in attainder of eternal shame” (154–55).

Eventually, Armado and Costard start to quarrel with each other in the final moments of the play. When the characters of the subplot entertain the nobles with an enactment of the Nine Worthies, Costard, who acts the part of Pompey, infuriates Armado, who plays the role of Hector, by publicly revealing Jaquenetta's premarital pregnancy. They challenge each other to a duel but, again, this fight is never performed on stage. While both combatants lengthily waste time with processes of re-arming ("I pray you, let me borrow my arms again", 5.2.683–84) or uncasing ("Master, let me take you a buttonhole lower", 5.2.688–89), they are watched and, once again, continuously mocked by their aristocratic audience. Ultimately, Armado backs down arguing that he "will not combat in [his] shirt" (5.2.692–93). Before any of the bystanders can persuade him to remain true to his commitment (5.2.694–95), Marcade enters as yet another ambassador from France announcing the death of the Princess's father. Again, an interruption sent from the feminised French court prevents the men from turning words into actions.

It is crucial to note that while carnival is a strictly *limited* period of licence and inversion, the play eventually suggests a permanent change to social (gender) conditions. During the festive season, the roles of king and subject, master and servant, male and female may be questioned, but, as Mahler points out, the end of this period is normally characterised by a "strengthened return to sobriety" (123, my translation).¹⁰ In *Love's Labour's Lost*, however, the ladies break this cycle with lasting effect. When the Princess eventually returns to a world beyond masked balls and theatrical performances, she does not simply experience a confirmation, but rather an elevation of her status. With her royal father's death in her absence, the Princess becomes Queen. "How fares your majesty?" (5.2.712), the King asks after the ambassador's exit, obviously acknowledging her newly gained equality to him in title and rank. Notably, when she imposes the penalty of a second celibacy on her suitor, the new Queen's first official act is a further subversion of male potency. Once again, she employs the language of amorous combat by twice reminding him to "challenge" (791) her after the expiration of a year. With the anticipation of this challenge as yet another trial of their love – and quite similarly to how a challenge to combat usually may end either in triumph or defeat –, the Queen leaves her relationship to the King ambiguously hovering in between potential fulfilment and unattainability.

Ultimately, the female characters in *Love's Labour's Lost* to some extent confirm Vives' concerns about women who wear masks and attend dances. Making use of their masks' transformative power, they go beyond a temporary change according to what Bakhtin identifies as a mask's association with "transition, metamorphoses, [and] the violation of natural boundaries" (39). They become, in Vives' terms, used to the "shamelessness," or rather to the unrestricted autonomy they experienced under their masks. Accordingly, the Princess and her ladies still exhibit a similarly witty and independent attitude when they dismiss the men in the end as they had done before in the course of the carnivalesque liberty of the masked ball. While the majority of Shakespeare's crossdressers tend to re-integrate themselves into the former social order when they remove their disguises, the female protagonists in this early comedy establish and manage to maintain a reformed hierarchy of gender relations. By refusing to accept male

¹⁰ The German original reads "gestärkte Rückkehr in den Ernst der Lebenswelt" (Mahler 123).

leads on the dancefloor, they eventually perform as leaders in the social battlefield of amorous interaction, thus displaying an alternative attitude towards, and a challenging of, the relationship between the sexes.

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Zusammenfassung

Die Vorstellungswelten von Tanz, Liebe und Krieg bestimmen Sprache und Handlung von Shakespeares Komödie *Love's Labour's Lost*. Eingeleitet von der zölibatären Kriegserklärung gegen amouröse Gefühle durch den König von Navarra, gleicht die Interaktion zwischen Navarras Höflingen und den Hofdamen um die Prinzessin von Frankreich einem Koketteriekrieg der Geschlechter. Als Schlachtfeld im Zentrum dieses Kriegs dient die Tanzfläche der Maskenballszene im fünften Akt, auf der die Frauen den Kampf für sich entscheiden. Ausschlaggebend dafür ist ihr geistreicher Einsatz der Masken als blickabweisende Rüstungsvisiere (*visors*) und ihre Weigerung, sich höfischen Konventionen zu beugen. Die Männer verlassen sich althergebracht auf Äußerlichkeiten als identitätsbestimmende Merkmale und definieren ihr Gegenüber über äußere Zeichen. Die Frauen hingegen erlangen die Kontrolle über die Situation, indem sie, im Sinne der frühneuzeitlichen Zeichenkrise, hervorgerufen durch ein ansteigendes semiotisches Chaos, jene Zeichen vertauschen und bewusst mit Identitäten spielen. Den Höhepunkt des weiblichen Macht- und Maskenspiels, an dem Hierarchien umgekehrt und karnevaleske Elemente mit der höfischen *masque*-Tradition vermennt werden, bildet die wiederholte Ablehnung jeder Aufforderung zum Tanz. Während die Männer vergeblich auf die Einhaltung der Balletikette insistieren, wird die Entsagung von männlicher Führung auf der Tanzfläche für die Frauen zu einem emanzipatorischen Schritt, der einer symbolischen Entmannung gleichkommt. Der Angriff auf die Rollenverständnisse im Tanz hat im Stück letzten Endes eine Neuordnung geschlechtlicher Hierarchien jenseits der Maskenball-sphäre zur Folge. Die Männer schwören demonstrativ, von weiteren Tanzaufforderungen abzusehen und werden nachhaltig in die Rolle der Folgenden versetzt, während die Frauen den Handlungsausgang als Führende selbst in die Hand nehmen.

