

# Women's voices in 16<sup>th</sup> century literature.

By Kelly Korim and Professor Victoria Burke.

## Introduction

In William Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, the women demonstrate superior rhetorical skills and more intellectual freedom than modern readers would expect for females during the sixteenth century. By comparing this play to Sir Philip Sidney's prose romance the *Old Arcadia* and Baldassare Castiglione's dialogue *The Book of the Courtier*, it becomes clear that Shakespeare was not the only author interested in female intelligence. This study, however, focuses on how unique Shakespeare's portrayal of female characters is in comparison to other authors during the sixteenth century. It also examines how these political women outwit their male counterparts by doing a close reading of each individual text. While this research does prove that other authors were engaging with intelligent female characters, it is apparent that Shakespeare allowed the women exceptional rhetorical wit and freedom in comparison to the male characters.

## Passage Analysis

*Love's Labour's Lost*

"*Princess of France*: We are wise girls to mock our lovers so... / None are so surely caught when they are caught / As wit turned fool. Folly in wisdom hatched / Hath wisdom's warrant, and the help of school, / And wit's own grace, to grace a learnèd fool" (*Love's Labour's Lost* 5.2.58-72).

In this passage, the Princess of France discusses with her ladies the ways in which they will outwit their ridiculous male counterparts. The Princess's **repetition** of words helps emphasize her point as she repeats words dealing with intelligence such as "wise", "wit" and "fool". The use of **mirroring** and **anadiplosis** in line 70 highlights the men's lack of wisdom, despite their education by accentuating the words "wit", "fool", "folly" and "wisdom". Another rhetorical device the Princess uses is a **chiasmus** in line 72. She does this by "criss-crossing" two separate ideas creating an AB BA effect ("wit", "grace" and "grace", "learned").

*Old Arcadia*

"... under her lips of those *armed ranks*, all *armed* in the most pure white, and keeping the most *precise order of military discipline*. . . his promise began to have but a fainting force. . . so that rising softly from her, overmastered with the fury of delight, having all his senses partial against himself and inclined to his well beloved adversary, he was bent to take the advantage of the weakness of the watch and see whether at that season he could win the bulwark before timely help might come" (*Old Arcadia* 177).

Here, Pamela sleeps on Musidorus' lap, after they have sung stylistically balanced verses to one another, which demonstrates their equal intellect. Despite promising her to wait until marriage to consummate their relationship, Musidorus attempts to rape her. Sidney's use of **diction** highlights the cruelty of the scene as he uses **military language** to describe the act. Pamela's lips are described as "armed ranks", which keep "the most precise order of military discipline". Musidorus' desires are also described with military language, but Sidney makes him the attempted conqueror. The language used to describe Musidorus's intentions describes the invasion of a city's defensive wall, just as he wants to invade Pamela. Despite his promise to wait to consummate their relationship, and their eloquent and well balanced versus previous to this passage, Musidorus' unsuccessful attempt at rape demonstrates his disregard for a woman's expressed desire.

*The Book of the Courtier*

"I say that for her that liveth in Court, me thinke there beelongeth unto her above all other thinges, a certain sweetnesse in language that may delite, wherby she may gentlie entertain all kinde of men with talke woorth the hearynge... accompaniynge with sober and quiet maners and with the honestye that must alwayes be a stay to all her deedes, a readie livelines of wit, wherby she may declare herselfe far wide from all dulnesse: but with such a kinde of goodnes, that she may be esteamed no lesse chaste, wise and courteise, then pleasant, feat conceited and sober" (*The Thirde Booke of the Courtyer* 217).

Here, Lord Julian discusses some of the traits required for a proper and respectable female courtier. While he does believe that women require "a certain sweetnesse" and wit in language, he argues that these qualities must come with "sober and quiet maners" so she does not appear less chaste. While he does believe that courtly women require intelligence and wit, he puts constraint on their ability for free speech by requiring women to respect certain sets of manners. The **diction** in this section highlights this belief as Lord Julian lists all the qualities she must have alongside her wit. It is important to note however, that while women could be constrained by their necessary manners, a woman oversees this **dialogue**. She is therefore placed in a position of power throughout the debate.

## Conclusions

All three texts read for this research project allow women wit and intelligence, however Shakespeare gives women the most rhetorical freedom in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Throughout the play, the Princess of France and her ladies constantly outmanoeuvre the men intellectually and prove their superior rhetorical abilities. While Pamela's verses stylistically match those of Musidorus in the *Old Arcadia*, he undercuts the importance of her intellect and desires with his attempted rape. In *The Book of the Courtier*, Lord Julian argues in favour of intelligent and witty courtly ladies, but restricts their rhetorical freedom by enforcing the manners expected from a woman. Overall, the men in the *Old Arcadia* and *The Book of the Courtier* limit their female counterparts' intellectual capabilities, whereas the Princess of France and her ladies in *Love's Labour's Lost* do not allow the men the opportunity to dictate their speech and point out their foolish behaviour. Shakespeare therefore created the most progressively witty female characters, which sets *Love's Labour's Lost* apart from other sixteenth-century texts.

## Methodology

Read and analyze three sixteenth-century primary texts (a play, a prose romance and a dialogue)

Apply different critical theories including:

**New Criticism**  
which allows for a close reading of the texts

**New Historicism**  
in order to place the texts in their respective historical period

**Feminist Theories**  
which will look at the performance of gender

Research and examine secondary, peer-reviewed sources which deal with the individual texts

## References

- Astell, Ann W. "Sidney's Didactic Method in The *Old Arcadia*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 24.1 (1984): 30-51. Web. 3 Feb. 2016.
- DeZur, Kathryn. "Defending the Castle: The Political Problem of Rhetorical Seduction and Good Huswifery in Sidney's *Old Arcadia*." *Studies in Philology* 98.1 (2001): 93-113. Web. 3 Feb. 2016.
- Hoby, Sir Thomas, trans. *The Book of the Courtier from the Italian of Count Baldassare Castiglione*. New York: AMS Press, 1967. Print.
- Larson, Katherine Rebecca. *Early Modern Women in Conversation*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.
- Northrop, Douglas. "'The Ende Therefore of a Perfect Courtier' in Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier*." *Philological Quarterly* 77.3 (1998): 295-305. Web. 3 Feb. 2016.
- Shakespeare, William. *Love's Labour's Lost*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephan Greenblatt et al. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Vol. 1. New York: Norton, 2008. 777-838. Print.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. *Old Arcadia*. Ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990. Print.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Victoria Burke for all of her assistance and guidance during this research project. I would also like to thank the University of Ottawa for funding the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program and program itself for offering an enriching opportunity for students.

## Contact

Any questions can be directed to [kkori100@uottawa.ca](mailto:kkori100@uottawa.ca)

