

May 2015

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Recommended Citation

George, David (2013) "Shakespeare Disenchanted: From Chivalric Court to Elizabeth's and James I's Courts," *Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference*: Vol. 6 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spovsc/vol6/iss2013/4>

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Shakespeare Disenchanted: From Chivalric Court to Elizabeth's and James I's Courts

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Chivalrous courts enchanted Shakespeare in his early plays—*The Comedy of Errors*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, and *Much Ado About Nothing* – but after about 1600 he was never able or willing to recapture their comic and romantic spirit. Those youthful plays span c. 1588-1600, and reflect the great influence of Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) and his sonnet cycle *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), along with his other important works. These all circulated in manuscript during Sidney's lifetime, and gained extra force with their publication. *Astrophil and Stella* appeared in 1598 and in reprints thereafter, but even in manuscript it had set the vogue for the sighing lover and the difficult lady he could not win. What seems to have happened not long after Sidney's untimely death was that Shakespeare's company began to appear at the royal court and that his increasing acquaintance with real court life nurtured in him a growing conviction that its superficial chivalry cost money and lives, and was in its workings arbitrary, treacherous, and hence dangerous.

Chivalry and Women

Before Shakespeare became disenchanted, however, he had somehow immersed himself in the cult of aristocratic love. *Chivalry* is, of course, from French *cheval*, the horse, and all the gentry, aristocracy, and royalty could ride well. The word first appears as a virtuous attribute of horsemanship, especially virtue with regard to ladies, in 1297; Chaucer, in his *Legend of Good Women*, c. 1385, writes, "Whi hast tow don dispit to chivalrie? Whi hast thow don this lady vilanye?" By 1606 the word in this sense (*OED*, 3, "the position and character of a knight; knighthood") has its last recorded use, except for Dryden reviving it in 1700 in his translation of *Palamon and Arcite*. The system of morality and gentlemanly conduct associated with horsemanship and cavalry had

originated in France and Spain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was a fusion of Christian and military concepts of morality, its chief virtues being piety, honor, valor, courtesy, chastity and loyalty. The knight—who usually received his knighthood at 21 - gave his loyalty to God, his spiritual master; to his sovereign, his temporal master; and to the mistress of his heart, his sworn love ("Chivalry" 1390).

This sworn love, by the way, was "largely platonic; as a rule, only a virgin or another man's wife could be the chosen object of [a knight's] chivalrous love. With the cult of the Virgin Mary, the relegation of noblewomen to a pedestal reached its highest expression." In France and Flanders, the most complex questions of love and honor were argued before courts of ladies ("Chivalry" 1390).

Still, the battlefield was where Christian soldiers practiced the virtues of military chivalry. When there was no war, they practiced chivalry at the joust and the tournament. Outside these boundaries, however, the knight was under no obligation to those who were not under feudal obligation. In the fifteenth century, the outward trappings of chivalry declined, wars being fought for victory and not for individual valor. Thereafter the cult was consigned to literature; "the endless chivalrous and pastoral romances [were] still widely read in the century" ("Chivalry" 1390).

Love's Labor's Lost

Love's Labor's Lost, written about 1593 or 1594, is a play about courtliness, an ideal court at Navarre, in north Spain, and the conventions of chivalrous protocol. The three courtiers at Navarre, Berowne, Longaville, and Dumaine, whose spiritual and academic leader is Ferdinand, the King of Navarre, have sworn to study philosophy for three years, live simply, and avoid women. Longaville is typical, "a man of sovereign parts he is esteem'd, / Well fitted in arts, glorious in arms" (2.1.44-5). Another of the three (perhaps Berowne) is a wild, show-off horseman; the Princess of France, watching him in the distance, asks, "Was that the King that spurr'd his horse so hard / Against the steep uprising of the hill?" to which Boyet, a French courtier, replies, "I know not, but I think it was not he." The Princess, impressed, remarks

"Whoe'er 'a was, 'a showed a mounting mind" (4.1.1-4). Now that the French ladies have arrived in Navarre, chivalric display is all that counts; so much for the study of philosophy.

The diplomatic business which is the purpose of the French ladies' visit to Navarre is dispatched in a single scene (2.1). In a letter carried by the Princess, the King of France claims to have paid a hundred thousand crowns toward the cost that the King of Navarre incurred in fighting France's wars. This money has not arrived, and another hundred thousand remains to be paid. The King of France had given Navarre "one part of Aquitaine" as surety for the loans. Navarre says that for half the unpaid money, he will give up Aquitaine. But the King of France demands the hundred thousand crowns to be returned, and leaves out any mention of Navarre's interest in Aquitaine. The French Princess politely tells Navarre that he did receive the first hundred thousand; Navarre demands proof, and then generously offers to pay it back or return Aquitaine to France. Boyet says the receipt (which presumably Navarre signed) is to arrive the next day. It is all very complicated, but Navarre behaves with careless generosity, sufficiently accounted for by the Princess's "eye-beams," on which the King writes a less-than-mediocre poem based on the conceit that her sunbeams will shine in his tears: "So sweet a kiss the golden sun gives not / To those fresh morning drops upon the rose, I As thy eye-beams when their fresh rays have smote / The night of dew that on my cheeks down flows" (4.3.24-27). Longaville's sonnet to Maria is somewhat better: "Did not the heavenly rhetoric of thine eye, / 'Gainst whom the world cannot hold argument, / Persuade my heart to this false perjury?" (4.3.57-9).

And that is all the court's business, ended by pairs of sparkling eyes; men stricken by the power of women's eyes had been a twelfth-century innovation, when women began to be

rescue[d]... from feudal obscurity [by] the frank recognition of sexuality... The game of love required the participation of the lady; without her acceptance of the romantic lead the play could not be done. Men elaborated the chivalric code, but romance (as its advocates were the first to insist) bloomed only by the kindly light of woman's eyes. (Foss 95, 105)

Shakespeare found the emphasis on the lure of young women's eyes in

Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), in which Stella's eyes appear under various tropes in twenty-five sonnets and five songs. Her eyes have "beams" (Sonnet 7) or "rays" (Sonnet 10) that can pierce a lover's heart and mind; Cupid shines in those eyes (Sonnet 12); they are stars (Sonnet 26); can speak (Sonnet 67); and have an "inward sunne" (Sonnet 71). Petrarch, whom Sidney was strongly influenced by, had two-and-a-half centuries before initiated

the elaborate doctrine and ritual of courtly love. It deifies the lady, refines and ennobles her lover, and turns the frustrations of unsatisfied sexual yearning into a civilizing influence... Although many of the *Astrophil and Stella* sonnets demonstrate how well Sidney had learned Petrarch's rhetoric and how closely he identified his point of view with what he took to be Plato's, only one of Sidney's sonnets [71] directly paraphrases Petrarch. (Putzel ix, xi)

The Princess's easy bargain opens the way to the King of Navarre and his three courtiers to romantic exchanges and wit-combats with her and her three ladies (Rosaline, Maria, and Katharine), with some comic mistaken identities, and a one-year moratorium on romance.

The venue for which *Love's Labor's Lost* was written in the early 1590s is open to conjecture; "the occasion of the play's first production is not known, but it was surely meant for a private performance—the house of the Earl of Southampton has been suggested—perhaps in 1593. As such it would have been part of the festivities in which music and dancing would naturally be called for" (Arthos 398). Another surmise is a private performance for Ferdinand, Lord Strange, fifth earl of Derby: "*Love 's Labor's Lost* may be seen as a bantering comedy written for Lord Strange's own entertainment by a privileged 'servant' who had observed Ferdinand over a period of years, and who knew what he could get away with" (Honigmann 68). Still, there is no proof to contradict the likelihood that the play was written for Lord Strange's Men and perfumed in a public playhouse in London.

Chivalry and Guns

Shortly after this, Shakespeare's company, now the Lord

Chamberlain's Men, began to act at Court. The company was paid for Christmas performances in 1594, and Shakespeare evidently had the opportunity to observe at close quarters the revived late medieval world that permeated it. Writing the Henry IV plays of 1597 and 1598 helped him to understand how real warfare had changed since the mid-fourteenth century: "The fascination with the old chivalric code of behavior is reflected...in the jousts and tournaments that continued at court for a century, long after gunpowder had rendered them obsolete. As often in an age of spectacular novelty, many people looked back to an idealized past" (Logan & Greenblatt 322).

Actually, artillery was available by the time Henry IV's reign (1399-1413); "during the Hundred Years' War (1339-1453) cannon came into general use," but were "cumbrous and inefficient" ("Artillery" 1). By 1380, handguns were available across Europe, and the matchlock, the first mechanically fired gun, appeared in the 1400s ("Detective" 1). As a result, the lance-bearing cavalry that had once charged so spectacularly into the enemy infantry was slowly reduced to the aristocratic cavalier who merely led a dashing charge. Hotspur in *1 Henry IV*, reporting the battle of Holmedon (1402), limns the portrait of "a certain lord, neat and trimly dressed, I Fresh as a bridegroom, and his chin new reaped I...[who said] that it was great pity, so it was, / This villainous saltpeter should be digged / Out of the bowels of the harmless eath... / and but for these vile guns, / He would himself have been a soldier" (1.3.32-63). And yet, the battle of Agincourt, fought in 1415, featured no cannon or guns; instead the heavily armored French knights went down to an onslaught of arrows, demonstrating "the obsolescence of the methods of warfare in the age of chivalry" ("Agincourt" 94). Indeed, the word "chivalry" appears only in *1* and *3 Henry VI*, *Richard II*, *1* and *2 Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Troilus*, and *Pericles*. Shakespeare limited it to the early 15 century and before, but saw it lingering in Elizabeth's I court.

Chivalry and the Queen

Shakespeare must have been distressed—perhaps even made cynical—to watch Elizabeth and the earl of Essex vying for chivalric honors in 1599. Essex favored individual daring to surprise the enemy: he

had fought at Zutphen in 1586, led the English attack in 1589 at Lisbon, and in 1591 challenged the governor of Rouen to a duel. Later, in 1597, he landed on the Azores where, to gain the glory of being the first to land, he leaped under fire into a boat. For this, George Chapman called him a "most true Achilles" (Shapiro 55). We know, however, what Shakespeare made of Achilles in Troilus: a master of realpolitik with an eye to the main chance.

Then came the Irish revolt of 1598 - Hugh O'Neill, the earl of Tyrone, had annihilated English troops, including five hundred cavalymen, with sniper fire at Blackwater in Ulster, and a new English general was needed. Essex was appointed, and Shakespeare thus salutes him in Henry V: "Were now the general of our gracious empress (As in good time he may) from Ireland coming, / Bringing rebellion broached on his sword, / How many would the peaceful city quit / To welcome him!" (Chorus, 5.1.30-4). But on March 27, 1599, Essex chose to leave London with an aristocratic show. Once in Ireland, he faced 30,000 Irish rebels with only 6,000-7,000 men, and so decided to neglect Ulster and attack south and west. Edmund Spenser had recommended burning Irish crops and fields, but Essex considered such a course unchivalric. He did, however, knight eighty-one of his followers in Ireland, and spent much of his money on a great feast in Dublin on St. George's Day, April 23. A ballad-maker wrote that "In Ireland, St. George's Day / Was honored bravely every way, / By lords and knights in rich array, / As though they had been in England." Elizabeth, the same day, held her own Knights of the Garter celebration at Windsor. She knighted Thomas Scrape, the earl of Sussex, and Henry Brooke, Lord Cobham-all mocked on stage by Shakespeare. Cobham dressed his gentlemen followers "in purple breeches, and white satin doublets and chains of gold," and his "yeomen in purple cloth breeches, and white fustian doublets, all in blue coats, and faced with white taffeta, and feathers of white and blue." (Shapiro 115)

Between them, Essex and Elizabeth, now rivals, spent nearly all the funds required to outfit the English army in Ireland; indeed, it was without shoes, and suffered from foot rot. Once on the march, the cavalry made foolish charges, including one by the young Lord Grey; chastised by the earl of Southampton, he packed up and went home. The rebels fought in the woods, using ambushes and guerrilla warfare, and so the English army returned to Dublin with almost no victories. Worse, a lying Welsh

deserter reported in England that Essex had lost 50,000 men near Waterford. In Dublin, Essex, furious, condemned every soldier to death, but then pardoned nine out of ten of them. The tenth man was executed. Finally, he held a chivalric parley with Tyrone in Ulster, where they arranged a feeble truce. Essex's career never recovered. According to Shapiro, chivalry died that day, 28 September 1599, when Essex burst into Elizabeth's bedroom at Nonesuch palace to explain his failure. Within two years, after his failed coup in London, Elizabeth ordered him to be hanged for treason and Shakespeare wrote no more heroic Henry the Fifth plays (Shapiro 115-16, 59-62, 287-8, 291-2, 296, 299-300, 302). From Astrophil's stolen kiss from the lips of the sleeping (and married) Stella (Sonnet 79) in 1581 to Essex's rude intrusion in 1599 on Queen Elizabeth before she was fully dressed is a huge step down, and it signals the rapid decline of Elizabethan-style chivalry.

The Death of Chivalry

Other scholars date the death of chivalry much earlier. Michael Foss dates its end at 1200 (115), Sylvia Wright at 1400 (7), Georges Bemanos on 30 May 1430, the burning of Joan of Arc (209). Peter Decker finds its end at the battle of Bosworth (1485), when Sir Thomas Stanley and his troops stood aside until late in the battle, and then charged the circle of knights surrounding Richard III (who had almost routed Henry, earl of Richmond, and his troops) and left the king open to a mortal blow (1-32); Richard Barber puts it in the fifteenth century (144), and Nicholas Orme c.1530 (222). The consensus is that Christian chivalry died sometime in the fifteenth century, and that chivalrous and pastoral romances rekindled the cult in the sixteenth century. Their huge popularity, especially that of *Amadis de Gauze*, may account for Elizabethans clinging to chivalric warfare (Barber 156). But it was only a revival, and "taken all in all, sixteenth-century chivalry was a sorry affair" (R. L. Kilgour, qtd. in Cooper 175).

Shakespeare now saw the royal court at first-hand, with company performances at Whitehall, Greenwich, Hampton Court, and Richmond. His plays after 1600 feature a variety of courts tainted with royal hypocrisy, spying, reneged promises and agreements, and arbitrary, cruel

decisions. The word "court" appears some 200 times in his plays, and nearly always negatively after that date. In *As You Like It* (c.1600), we find Duke Frederick threatening Rosalind, "You, cousin, / Within these ten days if that thou beest found / So near our public court as twenty miles, / Thou diest for it" (1.3.41-44). Rosalind's offense is that she is the daughter of Duke Senior, usurped and banished by his brother Frederick. In *Hamlet* (c.1600-2), the Danish court has under its surface the imposthume of fratricide and adultery; orders to remain at the court or permission to go abroad are arbitrary; spying is routine, and poison ready to hand. The play ends with the most blood-stained court in the whole of the Shakespeare canon; as Fortinbras surveys the corpses, he sums up: "This quarry cries on havoc. O proud Death, / What feast is to-ward in thine eternal cell / That thou so many princes at a shot / So bloodily hast struck?" (5.2.366-69).

The court in *King Lear* is little better, governed by an arbitrary old man, who has long ceased to be respected; he demands love from his daughters and gets only fawning for gain, except from Cordelia. Soon he has no court- his kingdom is divided into two provincial courts—and Goneril and Regan resist his attempts to make either his home. At last he is cast out on a heath; his Fool observes that "court holy-water in a dry house is better than this rainwater out o' door" (3.2.10-11). By "holy-water," the Fool means flattery - false tears of repentance. But Lear refuses to toady to Regan and Cornwall, his earlier beneficiaries, and only shame makes him think of not being reconciled with his beloved Cordelia, as Kent says: "A sovereign shame so elbows him: his own unkindness / That stripped her from his benediction, turned her / To foreign casualties, gave her dear rights / To his dog-hearted daughters: these things sting / His mind so venomously that burning shame/Detains him from Cordelia. (4.2.44-49). *King Lear*, written c. 1605-06, came two years after Elizabeth died aged 70, arbitrary, old and abandoned. When she died in March 1603, her "eviscerated" corpse remained in an anteroom unattended for hours while her courtiers rushed to prepare for the new monarch James (Richards 186). The courts in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* are not much of a relief after *King Lear*'s. King Cymbeline's appalling pride of rank separates the "poor but worthy" Posthumus from his wife, the Princess Imogen, who is the king's daughter by a former wife. "Thou basest thing, avoid hence, from my sight!" the king rages. "If

after this command thou fraught the court / With thy unworthiness, thou diest. Away! I Thou'rt poison to my blood" (1.1.125-28). Banished, Posthumus turns into a rebellious traitor. Similarly, Lord Belarius, banished for alleged treachery, has kidnaped the king's two sons. The court of King Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* is a nightmare of insane jealousy. Leontes imprisons and is estranged from his faithful wife Hermione, calls for his baby daughter to be burned alive, and loses his son Mamillius. He remains a virtual widower for sixteen years. His arbitrary behavior parallels that of Claudius, Lear, and Cymbeline. Shakespeare, as a leading member of the King's Men, was by now writing plays several of which were seen at James I's court - and the court of James, though he sought to be less arbitrary than Elizabeth, was full of favoritism and corruption (Willson 192-6). At or near the end of his career, Shakespeare sketched another court, that of Milan in *The Tempest* (1611). Of course, Prospero's court is in his past and future, but what we hear of it smells of corruption. Effectively Prospero's brother Antonio ruled it, and he had Prospero and Miranda launched on the ocean in "a rotten carcass of a butt, not rigged, / Nor tackle, sail, nor mast; the very rats / Instinctively have quit it" (1.2.146-8). In fact Antonio would still like to kill on Prospero's island, to remove Alonso, King of Naples, with a view to getting rid of Milan's vassal status to Naples. In the end he is unrepentant and remains a threat to Prospero's return to power in Milan.

Disenchantment

The youthful chivalric plays of Shakespeare's twenties and thirties (c.1588-1600) remain some of his funniest and most delightful; but once he discovered that a king "may smile and smile and be a villain" (Hamlet, 1.5. 108), there were to be no more idealistic young courtiers falling in love, with the ruler's approval. He evidently began to be disenchanting with English court life. And with that disenchantment came a perception that chivalry was outmoded and was a dangerous illusion in an age of guns and guerrilla warfare. The dashing commander has one last manifestation in Coriolanus, who takes Corioles single-handedly and in the end dies for the marvelous feat. A Roman soldier, charged to replicate the dangerous exploit comments laconically "Foolhardiness; not

I"(1.4.46). Nothing in Shakespeare's main sources accounts for Coriolanus's contempt for the foot-soldiers at Corioles; in fact, it was a medieval attitude, as Barber notes: "the mounted knight always saw himself as superior to infantry" (74). In another respect Coriolanus is like Drake, Raleigh, and Essex, all given to daring individualistic exploits that endangered their expeditions. The latter two were executed by their respective patrons, James and Elizabeth. Perhaps a few cavaliers continued the tradition in the Civil War, but effectively its revival died with Queen Elizabeth.

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