

Objects of Love and the Performance of Gender in *Love's Labour's Lost*

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Abstract

*Love's Labour's Lost stages a love pursuit between two groups of fairly similar couples, through a repetitive pattern which questions the nature of identity. This interrogation is both highlighted and concentrated in the gift of love tokens in 5.2, a standard of courtship reinvented on stage as the ladies exchange the favours received. Mocking their lovers, they wear masks so as to confuse them, simultaneously emphasizing the objectification of femininity achieved through the favours. They also function as mirrors of the lords' identities, enabling them to appropriate their own lady as soon as they wear the objects. The ladies thus symbolically refuse to be identified and objectified as women. Furthermore, the favours can be seen as what art historian Daniel Arasse calls "emblematic details," revealing and concentrating the nature of the work of art as artifice. In their critical appraisal of the favours, the ladies would thus be refusing their imposed aesthetisation. Reading *Love's Labour's Lost* through the prism of these objects of love exposes the performance of gender.*

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Love's Labour's Lost*; material culture; gender; women; detail.