In three largely dissimilar plays, and in very different ways, Shakespeare introduces an element of dubiety or disruption into the completion of a marriage – the phenomenon that Carol Thomas Neely identified in her seminal study of Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays. Postponement and improper performance of ritual, analogous to the motif of subversion of courtly entertainment so widespread in drama of the period, occur elsewhere in the canon, but they are most prominent in Love’s Labour’s Lost, Much Ado About Nothing and the problem play, Measure for Measure.

The simplest case is that of Love’s Labour’s Lost, where marriage is repeatedly invoked as the expected comic conclusion only to be abruptly displaced by the death of the King of France and the women’s demand that the men should demonstrate full emotional maturity before they are ready for commitment. To some extent, this play breaks the ground for the later psychological dynamic of All’s Well that Ends Well, especially since both plays are so firmly and overtly grounded in the turbulent world of French politics, where marriage and mayhem had proved so shatteringly linked when the wedding of the Catholic French princess Marguerite to the Protestant Henri of Navarre had precipitated the horror of the St Bartholomew’s day massacre. Just as the song of the owl and the cuckoo registers the full range of the cycle of human and natural behaviour, so the play as a whole does not hesitate to confront the necessity for elements of psychological growth which cannot be contained within its own comedic framework – another issue which surfaces again in All’s Well that Ends Well’s sustained forays into the terrain of closure.

LOVE’S LABOUR’S LOST

From the outset of Love’s Labour’s Lost a note of untimeliness and inappropriateness is sounded. Longaville says of Berowne, ‘He weeds the corn, and still lets grow the weeding’; this image of
the failure of proper husbandry introduces a sustained emphasis on metaphors of infertility and unseasonality associated with the young men's self-denying behaviour. The King says, 'Berowne is like an envious sneaping frost / That bites the first-born infants of the spring' (I.I.100–1), and Berowne does not deny it:

Well, say I am; why should proud summer boast
Before the birds have any cause to sing?
Why should I joy in an abortive birth?
At Christmas I no more desire a rose
Than wish a snow in May's new-fangled shows;
But like of each thing that in season grows.

(I.I.102–7)

This insistence on seasonality will recur with a vengeance at the end of the play. The Princess intimates ultimate success to the king, ‘If frosts and fasts, hard lodging and thin weeds, / Nip not the gaudy blossoms of your love’ (V.II.791–2), and the changing rhythms of the seasons provide the theme of the owl and the cuckoo song with which the play closes (V.II.884ff). C.L. Barber suggested that ‘The songs evoke the daily enjoyments and the daily community out of which special festive occasions were shaped up’, and that therefore ‘they provide for the conclusion of the comedy what marriage usually provides: an expression of the going-on power of life’. The play itself, however, seems to draw deliberate attention to its omission to provide the comic closure of marriage.

Such an outcome is obviously anticipated from an early stage. Boyet reminds the Princess what the situation demands:

Yourself, held precious in the world’s esteem,
To parley with the sole inheritor
Of all perfections that a man may owe,
Matchless Navarre; the plea of no less weight
Than Aquitaine, a dowry for a queen.

(II.I.4–8)

Navarre is 'matchless' in both senses, being a paragon who is unmarried; the suggestion that Aquitaine might be a dowry clearly indicates that a marriage would be both personally and politically