



Winter

When icicles hang by the wall

 And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
 And milk comes frozen home in pail;
When blood is nipt, and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl

 Tu-whoo!

To-whit, Tu-whoo! A merry note!

While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all about the wind doth blow,

 And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,

 And Marian's nose looks red and raw;

When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl –

Then nightly sings the staring owl

 Tu-whoo!

To-whit, Tu-whoo! A merry note!

While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

William Shakespeare



The start of a performance of *Love's Labour's Lost* at the modern reconstruction of The Globe Theatre

This poem ends *Love's Labour's Lost*, one of Shakespeare's early comedies. It is the conclusion to a play within the play, *The Nine Worthies*, which is presented to the King of Navarre and the Princess of France by the schoolmaster, the curate, the constable, a clown and a fantastical Spaniard and his page. There are two poems, Winter which features the owl, preceded by Spring starring the cuckoo.

After the poem, the Spaniard proclaims, "The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo. You that way: we, this way." The King and the Princess, as directed, go their separate ways, having earlier agreed to spend a year apart to prove that their new-found love is lasting.

The earliest recorded performance of *Love's Labour's Lost* occurred at Christmas in 1597 at the Court before Queen Elizabeth.

The critic Michael Billington wrote in his review of the 1994 RSC production: "The more I see *Love's Labour's Lost*, the more I think it Shakespeare's most beguiling comedy. It both celebrates and satisfies linguistic exuberance, explores the often painful transition from youth to maturity, and reminds us of our common mortality."

When icicles hang by the wall has been set to music by many composers, including Thomas Arne, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Hubert Parry and John Dankworth. You can hear Cleo Laine singing the Dankworth setting on this site.

(*Love's Labour's Lost* contains the longest word in all Shakespeare, **Honorificabilitudinitatibus**, the dative and ablative plural of a medieval Latin word which can be translated as "the state of being able to achieve honours".)