

Humanities Institute
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Two Gentlemen of Verona. 1589-93

Shakespeare

Overview. In this possibly first performed Shakespeare play, we find many of the trademarks of later Shakespearian comedy. To start, there is a culling of contemporary English—Elyot, Lyly's *Euphues*—plus sources with texts translated from Spanish. (Shakespeare was to become a master of the fast and sensitive read, that enabled him—virtually in the process of creation—to pick out themes, passages, character traits, and to put them to work in his texts.)

Thematic. Then there are in this play themes—fidelity, infidelity, coincidence, discovered identity—which Shakespeare will use to great effect throughout his career; there are even 'devices,' like sending forth a girl in men's clothes, as we see the case with Julia, when she sets off for Milan in the present play. Then finally, the present play characteristically concludes on an upbeat note, in what will be the standard ploy of Shakespearian comedies all the way to *The Tempest*, in 1611. Depending on your definition of comedy, for Shakespeare, you will find that slightly less than a third of his work, eight or nine 'comedies,' assume this form, which in many respects also infiltrates deeply into his tragedies and histories; as in the speech of 'common men' which marks so much of Shakespeare's most powerful language.

Characters

Valentine; young man living in Verona
 Proteus; his closest friend
 Silvia; falls in love with Valentine in Milan
 Julia; in love with Proteus in Verona
 Duke of Milan; Silvia's father
 Lucetta; Julia's waiting woman
 Antonio; Proteus' father
 Thurio; foolish rival to Valentine for Silvia
 Eglamour; aids in Silvia's escape
 Speed; a clownish servant of Valentine
 Launce; Proteus' servant
 Panthino; Antonio's servant
 Host; of the inn where Julia lodges in Milan
 Outlaws
 Crab; Launce's dog
 Servants
 Musicians

Story.

First stage. More than one critic has referred to this play, arguably Shakespeare's first stage play, as a trial run for those many later dramas—*The Comedy of Errors*, *As you Like It*, *All's Well that ends Well*—in which a complex network of plot developments, hidden identities, and unexpected coincidences unfold in a single streak of logic, and, at the end, characteristically wrap themselves up in a jubilant and all-pardoning finale. (All of which, as we know from the history of drama, was a proud inheritance from the agricultural dramatic festivals of early Greece—for example—in which a festive marriage, a dropping of grudges, and a bountiful forecast crowned a tale of knotted complexities, which for a long while gave promise of unending constipation.) To rehearse the plot, as though letting a screen unfold, is to enter the

intricate Shakespeare world, in which the comic is geometrically convoluted, and the tragic at its strongest challengingly deep.,

Universality. The setting of the play moves through the mind like a child's lego game, which can be set up anywhere, disassembled then moved to another venue in a click of the wrist. The name of the origin place is Verona, the place to stretch your wings and grow in is Milan, and the connotations of either place will be loosely associated to the culture of the time where the play is being offered. (Hence the 'universal' quality of even the earliest Shakespeare, which can so easily be read into another time and environment, right up to the level of a contemporary Broadway musical, where Pittsburgh and Boston can easily stand in for Verona and Milan.) Nor are all the places and spaces 'real', for there is a tower (in Milan) where a maiden can be locked, and a deep wood, outside the city, which becomes ever deeper as it discloses its treasure of outlaws, fallen nobles, and young couples in love.

Storyline. Nothing about the story line itself belies the story's abstract predictability. The necessary gender assortment pours through the drama: upper class boy and girl fall in love, but circumstances separate them, as boy's dad decides he should follow his friend who has gone to Milan to try out his wings in a more challenging environment. While first boy streams into a love affair with the daughter of the Duke of Milan, who loves him in return, the second aristocratic boy—his name, Proteus, which means 'the changeable one' aptly describes his insouciant character—falls under the same parental edict as his friend, and agrees to join that friend in Milan, leaving behind what has now become a deeply enamored girlfriend in Verona.

Duke. In Milan the complexity continues. The Duke has marital plans, for his daughter, the daughter whom boy number one (from Verona) is in love with, which sharply exclude boy number one. The Duke locks his daughter in a tower, to keep control of her, but boy number one gets the passkey, and is about to free the lady so he can elope with her. At this point, though, a battering ram of coincidence enters from left field. Boy two from Verona, now in Milan, is named Proteus, right? He is changeable. Well here is his story. Upon arriving in Milan, leaving behind him in Verona a girlfriend to whom he has sworn eternal love, he spots the Duke's daughter, whom boy one is soon to free from her tower prison. Boy two has by this time fallen deeply in love with the Duke's daughter, and when he hears that boy one is planning to elope with that girl he is afraid he will lose her, and spills the beans to the Duke about boy one's plan to elope. Enraged, the Duke banishes boy one.

Horizons. Over the horizon in the narrative future we will see developments which bring together boy one with the Duke's daughter—all is going to be for-given in all fronts (as out of left field as the wraps up, say, of later plays like *Cymbeline* or *Twelfth Night*)-- and boy two, the suitor of the King's daughter, once again reunited with his Verona love. The intervening details, which will involve boy one's temporary participation in a forest outlaw gang, or the outing of the girlfriend of boy one, who has traveled as a guy to Milan, in search of her boy one love, into the arms of her old first and only love. Coincidences, impulses, and gradual self-revelations, in which each character is eventually more understanding of himself and others: these are psycho-narrative issues put in play by *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

Themes

Patterns. As we noted above, in starting to retrace the 'story' of this play, there is an intricate intermeshing of events that lead to the jubilant finale of the actions. It is necessary for boy one to be immensely impulsive, in affairs of the heart, for his girlfriend to come out –from her male garb—just in time to keep her boyfriend from matching up with the Duke's daughter, and for the Duke's daughter to have given her heart to boy one.

Impulse. Proteus is the ultimate in passionate impulse. As boy number two, in our narrative schema, Proteus is a fond lover to his Verona girl, but immediately on arriving in Milan he falls for the daughter of the Duke, and forgets his Verona love. His impulse of love for the Duke's daughter leads him to a treacherous impulse—to tell the Duke about the elopement plans of boy one. Proteus is prepared at the end to accept the Duke's daughter as a gift from boy one, an impulsive act of misogyny, which adds fuel to our sense, that 'here may in fact be no 'gentlemen in Verona.'

Male superiority. In the last scene, when Valentine (boy one) has reconciled with Proteus—who had spilled the beans on the elopement plan—Valentine gives his girlfriend, ‘as a gift,’ to Proteus. This bit of male high handedness has attracted attention from critics, especially in our day of hypersensitivity to gender rights. The play has also come to attention as an expression of a culture of male homosexuality, in which the Elizabethan sense of the superior culture of men, among themselves, is everywhere implicit.

Commoners Shakespeare excels, even in this earliest play, in the speech of ‘common folk,’ as well as the extravagances of common madcaps, like Launce, the serving chap who appears leading his dog Crab, in Act II, and who gives voice to his family’s propensity for Jeremiads of weeping.

Nobility. The underpinnings of the play are all aristocratic, not surprisingly in an age when social value systems were still in the aftermath of the Late Middle Ages, and new money was just starting to vie with old blood for control of society.

Proteus

Character. As we have seen, this early or first acted Shakespeare play is about patterns of action and plot, more than about the choices, reflections, or mutual interplays that establish character. Given that trait, the present play probably takes its archetype from the ‘character’ of Proteus, the quintessentially volatile, impulse driven child of privilege, who can fall in love overnight, spill the beans on his ‘best friend’ the next morning, so as to get his hands on his ‘best friend’s girl,’ and chase his girlfriend into the woods in a seemingly madcap effort to rape her. ‘Character’ is sort of the word, here, for this intense simulacrum of a person, and if anyone is ‘main’ it is he.

Parallels. Protean can mean primal, changeable, elusive, a string of adjectives applicable to many literary characters: from the ‘god’ Proteus, who slips and slithers away from the information-seeking Odysseus, in the *Odyssey*; to Hamlet, who is forever reposing the meanings of moral imperative for himself; to Camus’ *The Stranger*, who is somehow always new in the world, somehow always being surprised by it, as he has to act into it; to Kafka’s Josef K, who like Camus’ creation of Meursault is fundamentally not stable and at home in the world, and is thus prey to the changeable in things.

Illustrative moments

‘Commend thy grievance to my holy prayer;
For I will be thy beadsman...’. As Valentine departs for Milan, young Proteus, in stiff and formal—and doubtless a bit ironic—language, assures him that he (V) will be in Proteus’ prayers. A young man’s empty formula.

‘Sweet Valentine, adieu!
Think on thy Proteus...’

The two men, who are just constructions in language at this point, take a ritual farewell from each other, as Valentine departs for Milan.

‘Thou, Julia, thou hast metamorphosed me,’ says Proteus, as he attempts to size up the overwhelming power of first love.

‘Sweet lines, sweet love, sweet love,’ expostulates Proteus, as in his excitement he sums up the effect his first love has had on him. His exuberance will prove deceptive, when the first love he feels will be overturned shortly after, by an even more compelling fascination, in Milan.

‘Yet writers say, as in the weakest bud

The eating canker dwells,’ says Proteus, poeticizing his experience of the deadly power of love to work from inside the individual...

Discussion questions

Love makes us blind, one adage affirms. On the other hand, as Saint Paul says, love helps us to 'know all things.' What do you think about the love-driven behaviors of Valentine, Proteus, Julia and Silvia? Does love make them fools or wise? Are there examples of older, more mature love in the play? Is Shakespeare interested in sexuality as such? What would he have thought of the highly sensitive gender discussions of our day?

Is the love of Proteus and Valentine for one another a sexual love, or is it a kind of noblesse oblige gender bonding which tacitly assumes its superiority to the vulgar necessities of procreation? This is a good point from which to survey Shakespeare's oeuvre; does this great writer show a fondness for children? Does he offer us images of young children or moms?

In Act Two of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* we hear a kind of soliloquy from Launce, the servant of Valentine, who is leading his dog, Crab. This soliloquy is a mixture of 'common speech, the common speech of the streets with a comic high-literary jeremiad on the woes of the world. Crab is roundly criticized for his own stoneheartedness; he has never been known to shed a tear. Is this kind of passage an example of Shakespearian humor? Whimsy? Concealed despair?