

The Two Gentlemen of Verona (Summer 2005)

Reading or attending a performance of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, at least for anyone familiar with Shakespeare's later work, is (I imagine) like touring a mine—everywhere, one sees potential for great and beautiful things, if they could only be placed in new settings. The plot, with its four lovers caught in arbitrary love triangles, lays groundwork for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; certain scenes anticipate, among other plays, *The Merchant of Venice* (as when Julia and Lucetta catalogue the various unattractive qualities of Julia's suitors) and *As You Like It* (as when Valentine falls in with noblemen banished to a forest outside the corrupt city), and it is here that Shakespeare first attempts what would become his favorite theatrical device: the young woman who cross-dresses as a man. Even individual lines call to mind better-known successors. Do we hear in Julia's excuse for her melancholy ("Marry, mine host, because I cannot be merry" [IV.ii.29]) Solanio's jest at Antonio's expense in *Merchant* ("Then let us say you are sad / Because you are not merry" [I.i.47–48])? Does Valentine's "Come not within the measure of my wrath" [V.iv.128] prefigure Lear's "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" [I.i.123]?

Such speculations, while fun to make, distract from *Two Gentleman's* idiosyncratic but real merits. The play's many faults—from the minor inconsistencies of plot to the outrageous, incomprehensible ending—have been well documented. (Indeed, I shall re-document some of them myself.) Yet good things demand to be said on behalf of certain men and women of Verona, and I shall begin, not with the most memorable of this largely forgettable bunch, but with perhaps the most sadly neglected:

Julia

For a comedy about love, precious few of its characters seem to be enjoying themselves. The self-important Valentine sets the tone immediately, chastising his friend Proteus for falling in love,

where scorn is bought with groans,
Coy looks with heart-sore sighs, one fading moment's mirth
With twenty watchful, weary, tedious nights.
If haply won, perhaps a hapless gain;
If lost, why then a grievous labor won;
However, but a folly bought with wit,
Or else a wit by folly vanquishèd.

[I.i.29–35]

Soon enough Valentine too shall join the club, but even at the start Proteus is an unenthusiastic member; whatever he professes to feel for Julia, when left alone onstage he sounds much like his best friend:

He after honor hunts, I after love.
He leaves his friends to dignify them more;
I leave myself, my friends, and all for love.
Thou, Julia, thou hast metamorphosed me,
Made me neglect my studies, lose my time,
War with good counsel, set the world at naught;
Made wit with musing weak, heart sick with thought.

[I.i.63–69]

Given such ambivalence, Proteus's readiness to slough off Julia the moment he learns of a "better" match is unsurprising.

In contrast, Julia wears her love proudly, giddily, and it well becomes her. Though "modesty" prevents Julia from openly pursuing Proteus, she has confided in Lucetta, her waiting-woman; their mutually feigned ignorance sparks some of the play's most delightful dialogue. When Lucetta exits without having disclosed the contents of what both women know is a love letter from Proteus, Julia—ever self-aware—drops the

facade:

What fool is she, that knows I am a maid,
 And would not force the letter to my view!
 Since maids, in modesty, say “no” to that
 Which they would have the profferer construe “ay.”
 Fie, fie, how wayward is this foolish love
 That, like a testy babe, will scratch the nurse
 And presently all humbled kiss the rod!

[I.ii.53–59]

Does Julia intend the bawdy pun that punctuates this last line? If so, she suggests a frank understanding of the sexual underpinnings of romantic love—an understanding that has escaped Verona’s men, with their idealized and ultimately unsatisfying desires. How long shall Valentine be content to gaze upon Silvia as “a heavenly saint” [II.iv.143]? Julia’s charming contradictions are glibly resolved by Valentine (“A woman sometimes scorns what best contents her. / . . . Take no repulse, whatever she doth say; / For ‘get you gone,’ she doth not mean ‘away’” [III.i.93–101]) and twisted by Proteus into a justification of rape.

For the moment, however, we remain on safe ground. Julia is torn between society’s insistence on propriety and her own desires as a lover, but unlike the men she can use the language of comedy to articulate this dilemma. After ripping up Proteus’s letter, Julia sends Lucetta from the room where, alone again, she is free wholeheartedly to embrace her plight:

O hateful hands, to tear such loving words!
 Injurious wasps, to feed on such sweet honey,
 And kill the bees that yield it with your stings!
 I’ll kiss each several paper for amends.
 Look, here is writ “kind Julia.” Unkind Julia!
 As in revenge of thy ingratitude,
 I throw thy name against the bruising stones,
 Trampling contemptuously on thy disdain.
 And here is writ “love-wounded Proteus.”

Poor wounded name! My bosom as a bed
 Shall lodge thee till thy wound be throughly healed,
 And thus I search it with a sovereign kiss.
 But twice or thrice was "Proteus" written down—
 Be calm, good wind, blow not a word away
 Till I have found each letter in the letter,
 Except mine own name; that some whirlwind bear
 Unto a ragged, fearful-hanging rock,
 And throw it thence into the raging sea!
 Lo, here in one line is his name twice writ,
 "Poor forlorn Proteus, passionate Proteus,
 To the sweet Julia." That I'll tear away—
 And yet I will not, sith so prettily
 He couples it to his complaining names.
 Thus will I fold them one upon another—
 Now kiss, embrace, contend, do what you will.

[I.ii.106–130]

This speech, still popular for actresses today, is the play's finest expression of the joys of romantic love. In spite of her words, Julia is in heaven: O that a piece of paper can spur the soul to such rapture!

Anticipating Juliet (another Veronese girl), Julia has no use for elaborate vows pledging faithfulness. Even Proteus can appreciate this quality. "What," he exclaims at their parting, "gone without a word? / Ay, so true love should do; it cannot speak, / For truth hath better deeds than words to grace it" [II.ii.16–18]. True love may not keep Proteus from seeking more worldly pleasures, but it incites Julia to don a codpiece and follow him, whereupon she gets a bit lost in the plot. At least Shakespeare finds space for more speeches in which Julia continues to puzzle out the nature of love. Comparing herself to Silvia, for whom Proteus has jilted her, Julia remarks,

Here is her picture. Let me see—I think,
 If I had such a tire, this face of mine
 Were full as lovely as is this of hers;
 And yet the painter flattered her a little,
 Unless I flatter with myself too much.
 Her hair is auburn, mine is perfect yellow—

If that be all the difference in his love,
 I'll get me such a colored periwig.
 Her eyes are gray as glass, and so are mine.
 Ay, but her forehead's low, and mine's as high.
 What should it be that he respects in her
 But I can make respect in myself
 If this fond Love were not a blinded god?
 Come shadow, come and take this shadow up,
 For 'tis thy rival. O thou senseless form,
 Thou shalt be worshiped, kissed, loved, and adored!
 And, were there sense in his idolatry,
 My substance should be statue in thy stead.
 I'll use thee kindly for thy mistress' sake,
 That used me so; or else, by Jove I vow
 I should have scratched out your unseeing eyes
 To make my master out of love with thee.

[IV.iv.183–204]

Once again, wisdom from Julia becomes mere rationalizing from Proteus, who—after inexplicably falling *back* in love with Julia—agrees she is as objectively worthy as Silvia: “What is in Silvia’s face, but I may spy / More fresh in Julia’s with a constant eye” [V.iv.115–116]. The difference between their philosophies is that Proteus naively assumes he can remain constant, if he only tries hard enough—and despite any indication he has changed. His unexpected bout of repentance is as characteristic of his protean nature as are his flirtations with villainy. By contrast, Julia accepts that love is blind and senseless. At play’s end she has her man, dubious prize though he is, yet she is careful not to claim with Proteus that such a union shall last “for ever” [V.iv.120].

Like many a Shakespearean lady, both Julia and Silvia are doomed to silence as their hapless beaux resolve the play. The tradeoff is that after the curtain falls, audiences likely still care what happens to them—more than may be said for the two titular gentlemen.

Proteus and Valentine

One strategy critics use to justify the play's bizarre ending—in which Proteus and Valentine seem more interested in rehabilitating their own relationship than in planning weddings—is to emphasize the degree to which Renaissance men valued male friendship. The typical argument, as outlined by Mary Beth Rose in her introduction to the Pelican Shakespeare's edition of *Two Gentleman*, is that Shakespeare “was interested in engaging the conflict between male friendship and heterosexual love, or, more to the point, between the requirements of homosocialism and the demands of marriage” [xxxii]. If this were indeed Shakespeare's intention, he might have tried harder to feature a more compelling male friendship—at least one that Launce and his “cruel-hearted cur” [II.iii.9] would not upstage. From their first entrance together, Proteus and Valentine make something less than a model of homosocial bonhomie. Valentine repeatedly scorns his friend's “fond desire” for Julia [I.i.52]; when they reunite at the court of the Duke of Milan, Valentine admits he has “done penance for contemning Love” [II.iv.127]—he has recently fallen for the Duke's daughter, Silvia—yet he somehow manages to sound just as scornful:

Valentine: Call her divine.

Proteus: I will not flatter her.

Valentine: O, flatter me, for love delights in praises.

Proteus: When I was sick, you gave me bitter pills,
And I must minister the like to you.

Valentine: Then speak the truth by her: if not divine,
Yet let her be a principality,
Sovereign to all the creatures on the earth.

Proteus: Except my mistress.

Valentine: Sweet, except not any,
Except thou wilt except against my love.

Proteus: Have I not reason to prefer mine own?

Valentine: And I will help thee to prefer her too.
She shall be dignified with this high honor:

To bear my lady's train, lest the base earth
 Should from her vesture chance to steal a kiss,
 And, of so great a favor growing proud,
 Disdain to root the summer-swelling flower,
 And make rough winter everlastingly.

[II.iv.145–161]

An actor playing Proteus may pursue one of two interpretations: Either Proteus genuinely respects Valentine's opinion, in which case by ditching Julia for Silvia he is simply following his friend's (unsolicited) lead; or else he realizes with the rest of us what an insufferable prig Valentine has become (if ever he were otherwise), in which case why by loyal? So eager is Valentine to tell the Duke about his intended elopement with Silvia, I suspect he would have bungled the operation even without any treachery from Proteus.

On the other hand, Proteus suggests just enough wit that it's not unfathomable why Julia prefers him to her other suitors. (Perhaps this is why Proteus sends Julia letters via Speed rather than his own servant, Launce, the only man in the play worthy of her.) Like Julia, Proteus has several soliloquies in which he attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible:

To leave my Julia, shall I be forsworn;
 To love fair Silvia, shall I be forsworn;
 To wrong my friend, I shall be much forsworn;
 And ev'n that power which gave me first my oath
 Provokes me to this threefold perjury.
 Love bade me swear, and Love bids me forswear.
 O sweet-suggesting Love, if thou hast sinned,
 Teach me, thy tempted subject, to excuse it.

[II.vi.1–8]

In the process he stumbles, however briefly, upon a deeper understanding of his own self-centeredness:

I cannot leave to love, and yet I do;

But there I leave to love where I should love.
 Julia I lose and Valentine I lose.
 If I keep them, I needs must lose myself;
 If I lose them, thus find I by their loss:
 For Valentine, myself; for Julia, Silvia.
 I to myself am dearer than a friend,
 For love is still most precious in itself . . .

[II.vi.17–24]

But Shakespeare is either unwilling or unable to sustain these notes, and almost before we realize it the play is speeding toward its improbable ending.

We shall never know how Shakespeare expected audiences to respond to this dramatic mess. Certainly we can find in better plays variations on the same twists that seem preposterous in *Two Gentlemen*: In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helena's irrational devotion to Bertram is as frustrating as anything Julia endures; *As You Like It* features several last-minute conversions as unmotivated as Proteus's, and *The Tempest* bestows forgiveness on an even less deserving character. But then Shakespeare expends considerable energies in developing the edenic Forest of Arden and Prospero's magical isle, to say nothing of their inhabitants. By contrast, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* seems tossed off and immature. And of course none of the other plays treats attempted rape as an occasion for male bonding.

In *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Harold Goddard performs the ingenious experiment of "translating" the final scene's poetry into prose. The result reads like parody, yet Goddard invites us "to inspect the scene as Shakespeare wrote it and to see whether I have not been faithful to both thought and action":

Silvia: I'd rather have been eaten by a lion than rescued by you. You faithless man, you are a counterfeit friend.
Proteus: What does friendship count for when a man is in love? If you won't respond to gentle words, I'll force you to yield to me.
Valentine (Coming forward): Ruffian! let her go.

Proteus: Valentine!

Valentine: Never will I trust you again.

Proteus: I'm ashamed of myself. Forgive me.

Valentine: That's all I ask. If that's how you feel, I'll take you back as my friend, and to prove that I mean what I say I hereby resign to you all my claims to Silvia.

Julia: Oh, how unhappy I am in that case! (*She faints. Then she comes to and the ring reveals her identity.*)

Proteus: How? Julia!

Julia: Yes. You ought to blush that you made me dress in boy's clothes. But it is better for a woman to change her clothes than for a man to change his mind.

Proteus: You are right. What did I ever see in Silvia anyway that you do not surpass her in?

Valentine: Good. Clasp hands on that.

Proteus: Heaven knows this is what I wanted all along.

[Goddard, 45–46]

Such a scene would be unplayable except as the broadest farce, yet as farce it is hilarious.

Why then do we assume because Shakespeare drapes the words in blank verse he means them seriously? Is this not to attribute an astounding lapse in judgment to a man who possessed one of the keenest theatrical senses ever? Is it not more likely that, as Goddard speculates, Shakespeare “observed some of the ‘gentlemen’ who frequented the contemporary theaters with their everlasting talk of ‘love’ and ‘honor’ [and said,] ‘I will create a compendium of all the fashionable vices, give him a running mate devoid of sense, call the two “gentlemen,” and palm them off on their English counterparts as the genuine article” [44]?

And yet . . . something in the play resists such an answer. At least for me, it's Julia. Though her soliloquies are terrific pieces of comedy, I hear in them sadder notes, and she undoubtedly suffers at Proteus's hands. For that matter, so does Proteus, whose own soliloquies reveal a clear-eyed understanding both of the evil that must come of his actions and his helplessness to act otherwise. This is not the stuff of farce, and I suspect it

is what sends us back to the play, though few of us particularly like it, wondering what we have missed. Safer to underestimate our own powers of perception than Shakespeare's.

Shakespeare was to have great success dissolving the boundaries of genre—in the Falstaffian histories, in the “problem comedies” that preceded his great tragedies and the “romances” that followed. Even the tragedies—*Hamlet* in particular—can defy attempts at categorization. Very early in his career, then, Shakespeare may have set out to write a standard farce, perhaps laced with social satire, only to find himself bored with cardboard characters. As he developed Julia and Proteus—even Launce, so different from his fellow clown, Speed, he seems drawn from another universe—how could Shakespeare not have wondered at their motivations and empathized with their pain? In *Two Gentlemen* he did not—or could not—follow these impulses for long; the result is his least satisfying comedy. In later plays, he grew more daring . . . and successful. He might even have returned to salvage from a rare failure a wealth of material for re-development.

One unpolished gem, however, he got exactly right:

Launce

Launce is as loyal and longsuffering in love as Julia, the main difference being that she pines for a dog of a man and he pines for a dog. (He briefly expresses interest in a milkmaid “who hath more qualities than a water spaniel” [III.i.269-270].) According to Speed, Launce's wit lies in his “old vice . . . [to] mistake the word” [III.i.280], though this describes every Shakespearean clown; in fact, Launce perceives more clearly—a few malapropisms notwithstanding—than anyone else in the play. He recognizes Proteus for a “knave” [III.i.262] and Valentine for a “lubber” [II.v.39], and he knows too well the

object of his own affections—his dog, Crab—“has no more pity in him than a dog” [II.ii.10].

If Crab were human, his cruelty would be even less excusable than Proteus’s. Launce “brought [him] up of a puppy, one that I saved from drowning when three or four of his blind brothers and sisters went to it” [IV.iv.2–4]; what’s more, says Launce, “I have sat in the stocks for puddings he hath stolen, otherwise he had been executed. I have stood on the pillory for geese he hath killed, otherwise he had suffered for’t” [IV.iv.29–32]. Should I ever be made the unfortunate director of this play, I would cast in the role of Crab a patchy, ratty stuffed animal—not to imply that Launce has somehow mistaken a fake dog for a real one, but to signify that loving such a creature is as truly one-sided as loving the “pebble stone” to which Crab is compared [II.iii.10]. This is not a play that celebrates love, and Launce’s seems doomed to be forever unrequited.

Like Julia, however, Launce is able to ease his suffering through comedy. The genius is in the details. Launce puts so much effort into properly identifying, in his moldy apparel, each member of his family because when it comes to love—whether romantic, platonic, or familial—specifics matter. Otherwise we are so many Proteuses and Valentines, blindly worshipping whichever goddess we see today, discarding whichever god fell off the pedestal yesterday. Launce’s home life may be chaos—“My mother weeping, my father wailing, my sister crying, our maid howling, our cat wringing her hands, and all our house in a great perplexity” [II.iii.6–8]—but it is uniquely his, eminently memorable, and so has meaning. Nay, he’ll show us the manner of it:

This shoe is my father. No, this left shoe is my father. No, no, this left shoe is my mother. Nay, that cannot be so neither. Yes, it is so, it is so—it hath the worsor sole. This shoe with the hole in it is my mother, and this is my father. A vengeance on’t! There ’tis. Now,

sir, this staff is my sister, for, look you, she is as white as a lily and
 as small as a wand. This hat is Nan, our maid. I am the dog. No,
 the dog is himself, and I am the dog—O, the dog is me, and I am
 myself. Ay, so, so. Now come I to my father: “Father, your
 blessing.” Now should not the shoe speak a word for weeping.
 Now should I kiss my father—well, he weeps on. Now come I to
 my mother. O, that she could speak now like a wood woman!
 Well, I kiss her—why, there ’tis: here’s my mother’s breath up and
 down. Now come I to my sister; mark the moan she makes. Now
 the dog all this while sheds not a tear nor speaks a word, but see
 how I lay the dust with my tears.

[II.iii.14–31]

Launce cries, we laugh, and the dog stares blankly offstage. It may not be the
 crystallizing image Shakespeare had in mind, but it captures better than any other the
 play’s strangely disinterested tone, and it is with this image I shall conclude.

Works Cited

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Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* are from the Pelican Shakespeare edition of the text, published by Penguin Books (cited above).