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The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare

VOLUME 38

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
EDITED BY JOHN DOVER WILSON

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THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA

So far as we know, this play first achieved print in the Folio of 1623, where it follows *The Tempest*. But it stands first on the list of six comedies mentioned by Meres in 1598; and all internal tests, of craftsmanship and versification, point to a date considerably earlier yet. It is indeed, by general consent, a youthful production: and we may pretty safely place it somewhere near the threshold of Shakespeare's dramatic career.

At all events, in the long interval before the stage copy reached the Folio printers the theatrical people had played some strange tricks upon it. Shakespeare's original carelessness may perhaps have been to blame for mixing up Verona and Padua with Milan[1], as for giving Verona a roadstead and starting Valentine for Milan—as easily as one might start him from Oxford to Cambridge—by sea. Shakespeare, first and last, was sadly addicted to finishing off a play in a hurry. But the final scene of the *Two Gentlemen* is vitiated (as we hope to show) by a flaw too unnatural to be charged upon Shakespeare.

Reserving this, and putting the vexation of it out of our thought for the moment, we can enjoy the play as a light and jocund Italianate comedy—Italianate, that is, in the Elizabethan fashion, when it chose to take its Italy gaily. For Italy was the traditional, almost conventional, scene of Elizabethan drama, and could be taken either way—with vice and murder, Borgia cups, daggers, tortures and intellectual refinements of depravity (with its 'blackguard quality air' to use Carlyle's phrase of King John), or with masks, mandolins and pretty amorous intrigue. Verona serves as background for Julia and for

[1] See notes on 2. 5. 1; 3. 1. 81; 5. 4. 130.

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Juliet; Venice for Shylock and for Othello as handily as for Gratiano; and Launce and Launcelot Gobbo are brothers and might inhabit either. In the original version of that most English of comedies, *Every Man in his Humour*, Jonson laid the scene in Florence and gave his characters Italian names. Few will deny that by transferring the scene to London and turning his eccentrics into English men and women he made—by this process alone—a vastly better play; that in his native-grown Comedy of Humours this increase of realism increases his vivacity and verisimilitude. The audience approved, and the successors and congeners of *Every Man in his Humour*—*Epicoene*, *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew's Fair*—were duly located in or near London.

> Our *Scene* is *London*, 'cause we would make knowne
> No countries mirth is better then our owne....
>
> (Prologue to *The Alchemist*, 1610.)

The apology, however, hints the innovation. In 1598 Jonson would stage his British comedy in Florence as unhesitatingly as, ten years or so later, Webster staged his Italianate *White Devil* in Rome or Padua; or—shall we say?—with no more trouble of artistic conscience than Shakespeare felt in dodging the centuries and dragging the right Renaissance scoundrel Iachimo into a supposed early-British *Tragedie of Cymbeline*. 'Somewhere in Italy' was in fact the spot where an Elizabethan playwright and his audience started upon agreed terms. Apart from the tradition and the romance of it, this convention of Italy conveniently accommodated the players, under a wide range of magnificent titles, with a still wider wardrobe of magnificent and miscellaneous costumes.

Guess-work suggests that in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* Shakespeare recast an old lost play *The History of Felix and Philiomena*, entered in the Revels Accounts, 1584–5, as having been acted by the Queen's company at Greenwich 'on the sondaie next after neweyeares daie at

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night': because the Proteus and Julia story comes straight out of an episodic tale in a Spanish romance, *Los siete libros de la Diana*, written by a Portuguese, Jorge de Montemayor, and translated by Bartholomew Yonge; and because the names in the title of this lost play repeat (with allowance made for a copyist's error) the names of the hero, 'Felix,' and the heroine, 'Felismena,' of Montemayor's story. Felix woos Felismena by letter with her maid as intermediary; he travels to Court and is pursued by Felismena in male attire; she lodges at an inn, overhears him serenading another mistress, takes service with him as a page—the recognition being effected later after a scene of combat in a forest. There are other points of resemblance, but these may suffice.

We shall get more instruction perhaps—as we shall certainly get more amusement—from looking forward than from casting back. For *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* holds a store of stage-effects which Shakespeare kept henceforth in his locker, to try them and to improve on them again and again. For a few examples—

(1) It would seem that he was already acquainted with George Brooke's poem of *Romeus and Juliet* (1562): for our play anticipates *Romeo and Juliet* (based upon that poem) in a number of particulars—the place, Verona; Silvia's window and balcony, most like Juliet's; the rope-ladder which Valentine has patented ahead of Romeo. Juliet makes assignation at 'Friar Laurence' cell'; but Silvia has been beforehand with her

> at Friar Patrick's cell
> Where I intend holy confession—

and (as Fluellen might say) there is a Friar Laurence in both. Valentine's burden of despair on the word 'banished' preludes Romeo's descant[1]:

> There is no world without Verona walls
> But purgatory, torture, hell itself.

[1] v. note on 3. 1. 170–87.

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> Hence-banishèd is banished from the world,
> And world's exile is death: then banishèd
> Is death mis-termed...

—and so on, through a score of suggestions and echoes.

(2) But when we come to *The Merchant of Venice* these echoes multiply. We have already noted the brotherly likeness between Launce and Launcelot Gobbo. It is a trifle in comparison with the scenes in which Julia and Portia discuss choice of suitors with their maids; a trifle when we consider the number of heroines Shakespeare set travelling after Julia in man's attire: Rosalind, Viola, Imogen and every single woman in *The Merchant of Venice*—Portia, Jessica, Nerissa. On a minor point, we may compare the use of the ring-token to bring about 'recognition' in these two plays.

The mission of the disguised Julia to Silvia is repeated and beautifully improved in *Twelfth Night*. The outlaw business is worked better and better in successive plays. Speed's discourse on the marks of a lover is father of a numerous progeny....But we have said enough, and need not extend the list.

We may, then (still bating the last scene), read in *The Two Gentlemen* something more than a graceful story charmingly told. It is that: but it also fixes and holds in arrest for us a fleet youthful and peculiarly fascinating phase or moment in the efflorescence of Shakespeare's art:

> For ever warm and still to be enjoyed,
> For ever panting and for ever young!

and our pleasure in studying it, though we have begun with dramatic 'effects,' by no means ends with them.

The diction is melodious, on the whole too mellifluous. 'Fine writing' still engages him, and a butterfly 'conceit' still allures him to pursue and over-run it. Lucetta has already (1. 2. 30) announced of love that

> Fire that's closest kept burns most of all—

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and Julia elaborates this later (2. 7. 24) into

> The more thou damm'st it up, the more it burns:
> The current that with gentle murmur glides,
> Thou know'st, being stopped, impatiently doth rage:
> But when his fair course is not hinderéd
> He makes sweet music with th'enamelled stones,
> Giving a gentle kiss to every sedge
> He overtaketh in his pilgrimage;
> And so by many winding nooks he strays,
> With willing sport, to the wide ocean....

We all remember the passage for its imagery, its cadence, and its delicately chosen words. But it is boyish, inexperienced: it keeps the speaker dallying luxuriously with an image while the dramatic moment slips away; the passion requisite for fusing the two having had time to cool. It is pretty: but it has not the masterly touch of

> And unregarded age in corners thrown

or

> O liméd soul, that struggling to be free
> Art more engaged! Help, angels! make assay...

or

> The lamentable change is from the best;
> The worst returns to laughter.

For promise of that, to find it in *The Two Gentlemen*, we must seek among chance lines:

> Poor wounded name: my bosom, as a bed,
> Shall lodge thee till thy wound be throughly healed.

> Wilt thou reach stars, because they shine on thee?

> Who should be trusted, when one's own right hand
> Is perjured to the bosom?

But the promise is there.

There is notable promise, too, in the characters. *The Two Gentlemen* would seem to be the earliest play in which Shakespeare turned from 'construction'—that idol of artistic beginners—to weld character into his plot. Again as in *The Comedy of Errors* he gives us two gentle-

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men with a servant apiece: but this time he discriminates master from master, servant from servant, to individualise them. To be sure, because he has to follow a ready-made story, we find him experimenting most happily upon the characters—upon Launce, for example—who give him most liberty because they are least tied to obey the exigencies of the intrigue. Proteus has to play the almost incredibly false friend, in order to work the story; and to make it plausible, even to himself, must spend most of his time and ours upon cold sophistries. Valentine and Silvia have been well called 'two silver-point studies,' 'somewhat high-fantastical, but gentleman and lady to the core.' The plot allows them high moments of generosity—nay, even works upon these—yet in its motion treats the pair as dupes, almost as dummies. For example, it is not by proof or by prowess that Valentine becomes captain of the outlaws, but simply because they like his looks and accept his bare word for his linguistic attainments.

Nevertheless, and throughout the play, we feel that Shakespeare, though—with the exceptions of Julia and Launce—he cannot, without making them dull, keep any of his *dramatis personae* steadily *consistent*, is always keeping them lively and always bringing them to the edge, at least, of startling us by some individuality. We feel, as we read, that these people are impatient of the convention within which they are held: that any one of them, at any moment, may break out and do something original; and this holds us in an atmosphere of expectancy which, if not the same as reality, curiously resembles it. Yet while individualising these people, he is learning to give them—the women especially—that catholic kinship which communicates to us, as we wander in Shakespeare's great portrait gallery, a delightful sense of intimacy, of recognition. They belong to a family—our family—the Human Family. For this trick of feature (we have already compared Julia and Lucetta with Portia and

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Nerissa, discussing suitors) let us take Silvia's hesitancy in handing back Valentine's letter:

> *Silvia.* Yes, yes: the lines are very quaintly writ,
> But—since unwillingly—take them again...
> Nay, take them.
> *Valentine.* Madam, they are for you.
> *Silvia.* Ay, ay: you writ them, sir, at my request,
> But I will none of them: they are for you:
> I would have had them writ more movingly...
> [*he takes the letter*
> *Valentine.* Please you, I'll write your ladyship another.
> *Silvia.* And when it's writ...for my sake read it over,
> And, if it please you, so...if not...why, so...
> *Valentine.* If it please me, madam, what then?
> *Silvia.* Why, if it please you, take it for your labour;
> And so good-morrow, servant.

and let us, bearing it in mind, cast forward to Beatrice's feminine hesitancy in *Much Ado about Nothing*:

> *Benedick.* I do love nothing in the world so well as you—is not that strange?
> *Beatrice.* As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you, but believe me not, and yet I lie not, I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing, I am sorry for my cousin[1].

We come now to the final scene, and, in particular, to the passage which has offended so many critics of sensibility: the lines in which Valentine 'empties'—as the Germans say—'the baby with the bath,' and, after pardoning his false friend, proceeds to give away (in every sense) his most loyal lady-love to her would-be ravisher. Here they are, as printed in the Folio:

> *Pro.* My shame and guilt confounds me:
> Forgiue me *Valentine*: if hearty sorrow
> Be a sufficient Ransome for offence,
> I tender't heere: I doe as truely suffer,
> As ere I did commit.

[1] The Folio allows no stop heavier than a comma to the hurry of this speech.

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Val. Then I am paid:
And once again, I doe receive thee honest;
Who by Repentance is not satisfied,
Is nor of heauen, nor earth; for these are pleas'd:
By Penitence th' Eternalls wrath's appeas'd:
And that my loue may appeare plaine and free,
All that was mine, in *Siluia*, I give thee.
Jul. Oh me unhappy.
Pro. Looke to the Boy.
Val. Why, Boy?
Why wag: how now? what's the matter? look vp: speak.

'All that was mine in Silvia I give thee'—one's impulse, upon this declaration, is to remark that there are, by this time, *no* gentlemen in Verona.

We must not, without a second thought, pronounce that this and the preceding line are not Shakespeare's—could not have been written by Shakespeare. They are uncouth: but he wrote, first and last, many uncouth lines, and his present editors will not challenge an obvious retort by making affidavit of their private conviction—firm though it be—that he never wrote these. They are dramatically inconsistent: they disappoint all that we suppose ourselves to know of Valentine's character, and so unexpectedly that we feel it like a slap in the face. But again it is not quite enough to say

> That he could have deliberately set himself to mar, in this concluding scene, his two silver-point studies of Valentine and Silvia, those may believe who will. That he could have done it, and not known what he was doing, is incredible.

adding that, if he really intended it,

> Why, we are left face to face with a mistake in art, an offence against dramatic propriety, which has no distant resemblance to anything else that is Shakespeare's. It is not a matter of youthful inexperience: there is no plausibility in the forlorn suggestion that he was imitating the faults of older dramatists. The couplet is no part of his conception[1].

[1] Sir George Young in *The Reading University College Review*, vol. VII. No. 19.

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For mediaeval and Renaissance writers had a fashion with Friendship: a literary convention of refining, idealising, exalting it out of all proportion, or at any rate above the proportion it bears, in our modern minds, either to love between man and woman or to parental love. We see it perhaps at its most extravagant in the famous story of *Amis and Amile*, in which Amile at the command of an angel slays his two children that their blood may wash Amis free of leprosy: but we realise it better in Montaigne, balancing his avowals of affection for Étienne de la Boëtie against anything and everything he says of marital love: for in the *Essays* we have this disproportion homelily, cheerfully, reduced to matter-of-fact and taken for granted. But we need not seek even beyond Shakespeare. That the convention lay strong upon him no one can doubt who studies the Sonnets, or weighs the claims of friendship and love in *The Merchant of Venice*. 'Shall we say, then,' writes Dowden, of this passage, 'that Shakespeare was here sacrificing truth and nature to a convention of the time?' Or may we rather admit that, after all, there *is* some plausibility in 'the forlorn suggestion' that he was—not 'imitating the faults of older dramatists'—but working on an old play; and that, in the end, after re-furbishing the story and making its characters life-like, he found himself faced with a conventional *dénouement* and closed the account with a tag of doggerel either contemptuously invented or transferred literally from the *corpus vile*?

It is possible: and we will give a devil's advocate yet a little farther scope. There is a tradition (which we are unable to trace to its source) that *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* proved a failure on the stage. If so, nothing in the play would account for it so easily as this most crucial blunder.

Allowing something—not too much, we think—to this tradition, we offer another hypothesis: first asking the reader to turn to our Note on the Copy for *The Two*

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Gentlemen of Verona, pp. 77–82 of this volume (noting especially pp. 79–81), where he will find our reasons for believing that the botcher's hand—or, may be, the hands of several botchers—may be detected in our text and throughout it. But here we deal with the most flagrant and vitiating passage, and suggest a possible explanation—there is no possible excuse. It may be, then, that Shakespeare invented a solution which at the first performance was found to be ineffective; that the final scene was partly re-written—not by Shakespeare—and given its crude and conventional *coup de théâtre*; that in this mutilated form it remained on the play-copy; and that so it reached the printer. We believe, at any rate, that no one can re-read *this* scene carefully without detecting that pieces of it are Shakespeare's and other pieces have been inserted by a 'faker' who not only was not Shakespeare, but did not possess even a rudimentary ear for blank verse. The opening lines bewray him:

1 *Outlaw*. Come, come, be patient: we must bring you to our captain.
Silvia. A thousand more mischances than this one
Have learned me how to brook this patiently.
2 *Outlaw*. Come, bring her away.
1 *Outlaw*. Where is the gentleman that was with her?
3 *Outlaw*. Being nimble-footed, he hath outrun us.
But Moses and Valerius follow him:
Go thou with her to the west end of the wood,
There is our captain: we'll follow him that's fled.

Shakespeare's prosody is often easy-going, and not seldom—to a pedantic mind—perverse: but to our ear it is never slipshod or vicious *in that way*. And this faultiness exactly coincides with a significant, if a minor, fault of dramatic craftsmanship—the damnation of Sir Eglamour's taking-off. Sir Eglamour—not to be confused with the knight of that name who figures among Julia's suitors in Act i, Scene 2[1]—has obviously been

[1] But cf. note 1. 2. 9.

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dragged into the plot by no fault of his own. He is just an honest, simple gentleman on whose chivalry Silvia makes claim for help in a most difficult adventure.

> O Eglamour, thou art a gentleman...
> Upon whose faith and honour I repose.

His answer is prompt, as his service is punctual. Without warning or excuse he is reported to have taken to his heels like the veriest poltroon! At once, helped by muddled versification, we perceive that this scene is running agley, that some interposing hand is murdering the verse along with dramatic consistency. Amid lines that have Shakespeare's trick and cadence are thrust strange ones that no ear can accept for his. Suddenly, with the crisis, we come upon the doggerel:

> And that my love may appear plain and free,
> All that was mine in Silvia I give thee.

Having noted the jingle which follows on the rhyme of 'pleased' and 'appeased,' we note further that there is only one other instance in this melodiously written play of an unrhymed speech finished off with two rhymed couplets; and that is the very speech (uttered by Proteus) which, if it have any meaning at all, improves in caddishness upon Valentine's offence:

> O heaven, were man
> But constant, he were perfect; that one error
> Fills him with faults...

—so far Shakespeare, perhaps: now for cacophony followed by nonsense:

> makes him run through all th'sins;
> Inconstancy falls off ere it begins:
> What is in Silvia's face, but I may spy
> More fresh in Julia's *with a constant eye*?

Can anyone believe Shakespeare guilty of this pair of tags: the first lame in scansion and unmeaning, the second balanced for our choice between nonsense and rascality?

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And where is Silvia in all this business? She is merely left. She utters not a word after Valentine's pseudo-magnificent, pseudo-romantic, renunciation. 'A curious essay,' says Dowden, 'might be written upon the silences of some of the characters of Shakespeare.' It would be an ingenious one if it could account for Silvia's silence here save by the alternatives, *either* of her being sick and tired of both her lovers, *or* of the whole scene's being (as we submit) a piece of theatre botchwork patched upon the original.

But it will be asked, if we omit

All that was mine in Silvia I give thee

—how do we account for Julia's swoon? Our own answer is that we do not try to account for it: our hypothesis being that the swoon and the couplet together are 'other man's work'; that Shakespeare had another *dénouement* which possibly proved ineffective on the stage, and that the one we have is a stage-adapter's substitute. To be sure, the stage-direction 'faints' or 'swoons' is an interpolation, not found in the Folio (which, in the text of this play, provides no stage-directions): but it seems to be required by the context *as the passage stands*. Sir George Young surmises that Julia does not really swoon but shams swooning. He holds Julia to be, in comparison with Silvia, something of an ordinary wench; that she and Proteus together are portrayed as 'lovers of common clay, of less than second-rate refinement,' meant to be a foil to chivalrous Valentine and Silvia. On our reading of the play we dissent: we really must divorce Julia from Proteus at this point. But we think it fair to give his interpretation:

...Julia had all her quick and rather vulgar wits about her. She thinks her little romance has been in the background long enough. She heaves a deep sigh and throws herself on the grass. This she does, as she proceeds directly to explain, because she has 'forgotten' to give Silvia the ring which

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Silvia has positively refused to receive from her. She then proceeds to play off on Proteus the same sly little game, of handing him the wrong ring, which she had already tried and found superfluous with Silvia, when she handed her the wrong letter. Her demeanour is an obvious make-up, to attract attention and lead to the recognition for which she has become impatient.

This *may*—though we doubt it—interpret the passage as it stands. But it offends against our opinion of Julia: and, for the rest, we content ourselves with the questions we have raised on the scene. We know that when Shakespeare was old enough, and craftsman enough, to devise the 'recognition' in the last scene of *Cymbeline*, with its

Why did you throw your wedded lady from you?

he could do better: and we believe that even in *The Two Gentlemen* he wrote something which, if theatrically ineffective, was better, because more natural, than the text allows us to know.

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TO THE READER

The following is a brief description of the punctuation and other typographical devices employed in the text, which have been more fully explained in the *Note on Punctuation* and the *Textual Introduction* to be found in *The Tempest* volume:

An obelisk (†) implies corruption or emendation, and suggests a reference to the Notes.

A single bracket at the beginning of a speech signifies an 'aside.'

Four dots represent a full-stop in the original, except when it occurs at the end of a speech, and they mark a long pause.

Original colons or semicolons, which denote a somewhat shorter pause, are retained, or represented as three dots when they appear to possess special dramatic significance.

Similarly, significant commas have been given as dashes.

Round brackets are taken from the original, and mark a significant change of voice; when the original brackets seem to imply little more than the drop in tone accompanying parenthesis, they are conveyed by commas or dashes.

In plays for which both Folio and Quarto texts exist, passages taken from the text not selected as the basis for the present edition will be enclosed within square brackets.

Single inverted commas (' ') are editorial; double ones (" ") derive from the original, where they are used to draw attention to maxims, quotations, etc.

The reference number for the first line is given at the head of each page. Numerals in square brackets are placed at the beginning of the traditional acts and scenes.

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