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The Two Gentlemen of Verona

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Themes

posted Aug 9, 2013, 11:35 PM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 9, 2013, 11:35 PM**]

Love

Love makes men and women do some pretty strange things in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. It turns men and women into fickle creatures and has the potential to transform men into unrecognizable and lovesick fools, or worse. At the same time, in Valentine and Silvia, we see two young lovers willing to risk everything to be together – an idea that Shakespeare will later develop in *Romeo and Juliet*. Romantic love between men and women, of course, is also pitted against the bonds of male friendship.

Violence

Two Gentlemen of Verona culminates in an attempted rape that is narrowly averted and quickly forgiven. In fact, the threat of sexual violence seems to echo all throughout the play. Proteus's attempt to rape Silvia is preceded by a reference to the mythical Philomela's rape by Tereus (5.4.1), Valentine makes the outlaws swear to "do no outrages/ On silly women" (4.1.12), and Julia disguises herself as "Sebastian" so she can avoid "loose encounters of lascivious men" (2.7.4). In the play, the threat of rape seems to be symptomatic of a world in which men see women as objects to be possessed, stolen, or bestowed upon other men as "gifts."

Society and Class

While some earlier sixteenth-century plays portray servants as shadows of the main characters

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(minor characters and servants often mimicked their masters' behaviors), Shakespeare does something relatively new in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In the play, the servants' attitudes towards marriage, love, loyalty, and social standing often call attention to the foibles of their masters. Shakespeare, then, is probably the first playwright to portray servants who are capable of defining the main characters. For example, Lance's devotion to his dog Crab draws our attention to Proteus's disloyalty to Julia and Valentine. The servants in *Two Gentlemen* are more than mere sounding boards and offer much more than mere comic relief.

Friendship

Two Gentlemen of Verona is often described as a "celebration" of male friendship. In the play, male bonds are threatened by heterosexual romance and one man's capacity for betrayal. While some critics read the play as an attempt to reconcile the tension between friendship and heterosexual love, others see a play in which male bonds are given priority over all other relationships. We can also read the play as an exploration of common sixteenth-century attitudes. For many prominent writers and philosophers, male friendship was considered the most elevated form of human connectedness. Shakespeare's portrayal of male bonds in *Two Gentlemen* echoes throughout his other works – especially the *Sonnets*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Winter's Tale*.

Analysis

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The primary theme addressed in Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is the conflict between loyalty to friends and submission to passion. While the play ultimately aligns itself with the tradition of espousing one side of the debate (the reestablishment of the friendship between Valentine and Proteus leads to a resolution of the non-platonic relationships), the moral twists and turns that each character takes in order to reach the drama's unlikely conclusion involve a host of other themes. Additionally, by writing a play about friendship versus love, the young bard was entering into a debate with writers who, at the time, were more established than he--namely, Chaucer, Lyly and Francis Bacon. By offering a view that

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challenged the works of these household names, Shakespeare presented himself as a competitor to the moral and narrative stance proposed by the great writers of his time.

The servants Launce, Speed, and Lucetta act as foils to their respective masters Proteus, Valentine, and Julia. By examining the servants' characteristics and behavior, the reader comes to understand their masters better as well. Launce's pragmatic reasoning about love illuminates the hunger for status and money permeating the aristocrats' staid romances. Lucetta, by advising Julia in the practical matter of disguising herself as a man, demonstrates her knowledge of socially-accepted gender roles. Lucetta understands that while it is expected that a young man will stray from his love, it is socially unacceptable for a young woman to be wanton. Since the higher status characters cannot honestly confront the social influences that guide their choices (and limit their options), the discussion of weighty issues (sexuality, money, class) falls to the servants.

The forest, significant throughout Shakespeare's plays, is important as a setting in which social norms are suspended. As in the fairy-infested thickets of [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#), social status dissolves when characters are plucked from the rigidity of their traditional social settings and transplanted into the ambiguous realm of the forest. Individuals are judged as individuals in this setting, and the breakdown of traditional structure permits the flow of currents of behavior (homosexuality, merit-based social mobility, etc.) that run counter to established norms.

The quick and somewhat puzzling simplicity of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona's* conclusion allows thematic ambiguities to linger. In Proteus' feeling that Julia, still appearing male, is more attractive than Silvia and Valentine's deep devotion to Proteus, both sexual and gender identities are blurred. Julia's assumption of maleness gives her access to the male world, testing the boundaries of socially-perceived gender roles; that she maintains her outward maleness challenges Elizabethan sexual mores. Likewise, Valentine's willingness to yield his beloved, Silvia, to Proteus, hints at latent homosexual desires. Though Shakespeare resolves the play's outward tensions, he leaves the exploration of deeper issues, which resurface throughout his works, incomplete

Characters

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Proteus

Valentine's supposed best friend and one of the title gentleman of Verona, though he behaves in a most ungentlemanly fashion. He is Julia's sweetheart at the beginning of the play, but when he joins Valentine at the Duke's palace, he falls in love with Silvia and attempts to steal her away from Valentine and Thurio.

Valentine

The other title gentlemen of Verona. He is Proteus' best friend, and Silvia's love. Banished to the forest after Proteus betrays his plan to elope with Silvia to the Duke, Valentine becomes king of the outlaws.

Julia

Proteus' beloved, and mistress to the servant Lucetta. Desiring to travel to Milan to visit Proteus, Julia disguises herself as a high-class male page in order to avoid lecherous advances along the journey. Calling herself Sebastian, she does Proteus' bidding, delivering the ring she had earlier given him to his new beloved, Silvia.

Silvia

Daughter to the Duke and beloved of Valentine, also sought after by Proteus and Thurio. Silvia commiserates with Sebastian over the wrong that Proteus has done to Julia. She escapes her father's palace with the help of Sir Eglamour, who abandons her at the sight of the outlaws.

Duke of Milan

Silvia's father, the Duke wants her to marry the boorish but wealthy suitor Sir Thurio. Upon hearing of Valentine's plot to elope with Silvia, the Duke banishes Valentine.

Lucetta

Julia's servant, who considers love from a practical point of view. Lucetta helps Julia disguise herself as a man.

Launce

Proteus' humorous servant, and master to a poorly-trained mutt named Crab. His devotion to his dog knows no bounds. He falls in love with an ugly but wealthy maid.

Speed

Valentine's page, though at the beginning of the play he does Proteus' bidding as well. He is friendly with Launce.

Thurio

A foolish rival to Valentine for Silvia's hand. Thurio is very rich, but does not make for pleasant company.

Sir Eglamour

The gentleman upon whom Silvia calls to help her escape from the Duke's court, in order to find her love, Valentine, and to avoid marrying Thurio.

Antonio

Father to Proteus and master to the servant Panthino.

Host

Houses Julia while she searches for Proteus.

Outlaws

When Valentine is banished from Milan, the outlaws intercept him during his journey to Mantua and make him the king of their crew of gentlemen bandits.

Crab –

Launce's dog.

Panthino

Antonio's servant.

Summary

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When the play opens, Valentine and Proteus (a.k.a. the two gentlemen of Verona) are in the middle of an emotional goodbye. You see, Valentine is leaving for Milan and his BFF is sad to see him go. Proteus would join him on his adventure, but he's in love with Julia so he's decided to stay home in Verona to be with her.

Meanwhile, Julia is hanging out with her woman in waiting, Lucetta. The two discuss which one of popular Julia's suitors is the dreamiest. Julia is partial to Proteus, but he's the only guy who *hasn't* proposed to her yet. As Julia wonders why that is, Lucetta whips out a letter from Proteus and hands it over to Julia, who pretends she's too modest to read it. After a silly little game of "I don't want to read it, send it back," Julia demands the love note and then tears it to shreds when Lucetta teases her. She immediately regrets it and tries to piece it back together.

Meanwhile, when Proteus's dad hears that people have been talking trash about him for not sending his son to travel abroad (that's what all the noblemen do, apparently), he decides to send Proteus to Milan, where he can become a well-rounded person (by going to jousts and hanging out with the children of other noblemen). Proteus tries to waffle – he was hoping to spend his summer going to the beach and hanging out at Dairy Queen with his girl Julia, but his dad won't let him wriggle out of traveling abroad. Proteus visits Julia one last time – they exchange rings and she cries. Then Proteus heads to Milan, where Valentine has been hanging out.

Speaking of Valentine...in Milan, he has met and fallen in love with the beautiful and sassy Silvia. Silvia treats Valentine like her "servant" and Valentine loves every minute of it. (That's how guys and girls flirt in "courtly romance" literature, which Shakespeare is, to some extent, making fun of here.)

When Proteus shows up, he promptly falls in love with Silvia, forgetting all about the girl he left back home. Then Proteus does something awful – he tattles on Valentine (who plans to elope with Silvia) to Silvia's protective father, the Duke of Milan. When the Duke approaches Valentine, a steamy lover letter to Silvia and a rope ladder fall out of the young man's jacket. (We're not sure how all that stuff fit in his coat.) The Duke says something like "Aha! You're planning to climb that ladder up to my daughter's bedroom. Get out of my sight." Ultimately, the Duke banishes Valentine from Milan – if Valentine shows his face in town ever again, he'll be put to death.

Meanwhile, back in Verona, Julia has decided she's going to travel to Milan to find her beloved Proteus. She dresses like a boy so she can travel without being accosted by any "lascivious men" who would try to ravish her. Julia gets gussied up in a pair of "breeches" (pants) and a fancy codpiece (what amounts to a decorative jockstrap) and heads to Milan, where she discovers her beloved Proteus...hitting on Silvia.

While this is happening, our boy Valentine is riding through a forest somewhere between Milan and Mantua when a band of outlaws pounce on him. Valentine lies about having killed a man and the outlaws are totally impressed. They decide he should be the Robin Hood to their band of merry thieves, so they invite him to be the leader of their forest dwelling gang. Valentine agrees to live with them in the forest but makes them promise not to hurt any "silly women" or helpless travelers.

Back in Milan, Julia is calling herself "Sebastian" and has landed a job as Proteus's errand boy. (Apparently, Julia wants to size up the competition in secret.) When Proteus sends "Sebastian" to deliver a ring to Silvia, "Sebastian" and Silvia get to talking. Silvia refuses to take the ring because she knows it once belonged to Julia. Julia admits to the audience that this is a good thing because she would have "scratched out" Silvia's eyes if she wasn't such a nice person.

Silvia is still in love with banished Valentine, so she convinces her good friend Eglamour to help her find him – the two run off to the forest, where Silvia is kidnapped by the outlaws, who proceed to take her to their leader, Valentine. (How convenient.) Meanwhile, the Duke has learned his daughter ran away and has organized a posse to track her down in the forest. Proteus tags along.

In the forest, Proteus catches up to Silvia and "rescues" her from the outlaws. He then tries to convince her that she should drop Valentine and get with him. When she refuses to love him, he tries to rape her. Before Proteus can assault Silvia, however, Valentine steps in and...yells at Proteus for betraying their friendship. (Yeah, we were sort of hoping Proteus would be punished for trying to rape Silvia, but no such luck.)

Proteus says he's sorry for being a lousy friend and Valentine says, "All that was mine in Silvia I give thee" (5.4). There are a few ways to read this but you'll have to go to "What's Up with the Ending?" if you want to know what we think...

Before Proteus can respond, "Sebastian" faints dramatically and then reveals that "he" is actually Julia. Proteus takes one look at his former girlfriend and falls back in love with her. Julia forgives Proteus and the two are engaged. The Duke, who has also arrived in the forest, decides that Valentine is a great guy after all, so he gives his daughter to him as a "gift." Valentine thinks this is just swell. (Apparently, Silvia does too, but we don't hear a peep out of her after Proteus's attempted rape.) Valentine suggests a double wedding is in order and the crew heads back to the Duke's place for a big reception.

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