

# The Two Gentlemen of Verona

This is little more than the first outlines of a comedy loosely sketched in. It is the story of a novel dramatized with very little labour or pretension; yet there are passages of high poetical spirit, and of inimitable quaintness of humour, which are undoubtedly Shakespeare's, and there is throughout the conduct of the fable a careless grace and felicity which marks it for his. One of the editors (we believe, Mr. Pope) remarks in a marginal note to the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: 'It is observable (I know not for what cause) that the style of this comedy is less figurative, and more natural and unaffected than the greater part of this author's, though supposed to be one of the first he wrote.' Yet so little does the editor appear to have made up his mind upon this subject, that we find the following note to the very next (the second) scene. 'This whole scene, like many others in these plays (some of which I believe were written by Shakespeare, and others interpolated by the players) is composed of the lowest and most trifling conceits, to be accounted for only by the gross taste of the age he lived in: Populo ut placent. I wish I had authority to leave them out, but I have done all I could, set a mark of reprobation upon them, throughout this edition.' It is strange that our fastidious critic should fall so soon from praising to reprobating. The style of the familiar parts of this comedy is indeed made up of conceits—low they may be for what we know, but then they are not poor, but rich ones. The scene of Launce with his dog (not that in the second, but that in the fourth act) is a perfect treat in the way of farcical drollery and invention; nor do we think Speed's manner of proving his master to be in love deficient in wit or sense, though the style may be criticized as not simple enough for the modern taste.

“ Valentine. Why, how know you that I am in love?

Speed. Marry, by these special marks; first, you have learned, like Sir Protheus, to wreath your arms like a malcontent, to relish a love-song like a robin-red-breast, to walk alone like one that had the pestilence, to sigh like a schoolboy that had lost his A B C, to weep like a young wench that had buried her grandam, to fast like one that takes diet, to watch like one that fears robbing, to speak puling like a beggar at Hallowmas. You were wont, when you laughed, to crow like a cock; when you walked, to walk; like one of the lions; when you fasted, it was presently after dinner; when you looked sadly, it was for want of money; and now you are metamorphosed with a mistress, that when I look on you, I can hardly think you my master.

The tender scenes in this play, though not so highly wrought as in some others, have often much sweetness of sentiment and expression. There is something pretty and playful in the conversation of Julia with her maid, when she shows such a disposition to coquetry about receiving the letter from Proteus; and her behaviour afterwards and her disappointment, when she finds him faithless to his vows, remind us at a distance of Imogen's tender constancy. Her answer to Lucetta, who advises her against following her lover in disguise, is a beautiful piece of poetry.

Lucetta. I do not seek to quench your love's hot fire,  
But qualify the fire's extremes! rage,  
Lest it should burn above the bounds of reason.

Julia. The more thou damm'st it up, the more it burns;  
The current that with gentle murmur glides,  
Thou know'st, being stopp'd, impatiently doth rage;  
But when his fair course is not hindered,  
He makes sweet music with th' enamell'd 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 wild ocean.

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Then let me go, and hinder not my course;  
I'll be as patient as a gentle stream,  
And make a pastime of each weary step,  
Till the last step have brought me to my love;  
And there I'll rest, as after much turmoil,  
A blessed soul doth in Elysium.

If Shakespeare indeed had written only this and other passages in the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, he would *almost* have deserved Milton's praise of him—

“ And sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,  
Warbles his native wood-notes wild.

But as it is, he deserves rather more praise than this.

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1. 'The river wanders at its own sweet will.' Wordsworth.