

SAA 2015: The Two Gentlemen of Verona
Seminar Organizers: Elizabeth Rivlin (Clemson University) and Melissa Walter
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Thursday, April 2, 2015, 3:30 – 5:30 pm

Rolf O. Mueller, “WHO is Sylvia OR WHAT is she...?”

This paper deals with various perspectives to give light to basic demands spread by the play itself and numerous interpretations of selected aspects. One of the main ideas is the evaluation of characters: mood and tone of the multiple translations should lead to a new focus on reconsidering gender roles as well as historical appreciations, the degree of irony or even cynicism. By means of translations fundamental issues will be detected such as the musical dimension of the play. Variations in tone and mood will be depicted such as the long tradition of translating Shakespeare in Germany. Franz Schubert’s approach will be critically analysed, the lyrics will be set into relationship to the dominance of music, be it a musical or its multitudinous variations. Centred round the song in (4.2) the structure of roles is reflected in many ways and it does re-sult in a new and imaginary interpretation of the pivotal scene.

Moreover, this approach reveals a constant underlying quality of parody within the play. Love cannot be seen at face value; it is a result of juvenile novelty and physical maturity. These dialectics constitute Courtly Love and Friendship within a given structure. Genre and comic form are a determining factor in this play. As seen in many performances *Two Gentlemen* includes a “Sinatry-style” touch and remind us with the implication of “the man with the dog” of a varie-ty show. “Laughing with the audience” is another aspect as a well-known characteristic trait.

David Schalkwyk, “‘Shaping Fantasies’ in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*”

This paper revisits the question of Proteus's attempted rape of Silvia, arguing that far from being a disconcerting aberration of the central love plot, it is in fact the culmination of the creation of woman as fantasy image by the rival friends and lovers. It follows Rene Girard in its argument that the play does not represent the triumph of homosocial friendship above erotic desire but rather that erotic desire arises from the nature of male friendship, and traces a Lacanian argument that both lovers harbour the same kind of erotic fantasy of Silvia as the ultimately unattainable and unrepresentable 'thing' (in the Feudian sense) of male desire.

Jonathan Sircy, “The Burden of Witnessing in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*”

The Two Gentlemen of Verona conspicuously fails to match the normal world/green world/normal world structure Northrop Frye assigns to it. Instead, the play features two different normal worlds, first Verona then Milan, before ending in the forest. Milan is indeed different from Verona, but it’s as though the play has skipped to its rhythmic return before undergoing the necessary change. Something strange is going on in the

Mantuan Forest, and the structure of *Two Gentlemen* will not allow its characters to simply return from it.

The play's movement from Verona to Milan to the Mantuan Forest makes more sense, I argue, if we connect the shift in locations to one of the play's dominant motifs: vision. Namely, each setting has a distinctive mode of vision: not seeing (Verona), being seen (Milan), and witnessing (the Mantuan Forest). In Verona, conflicted relationships appear to be the product of personal blind-spots, something characters can't see or choose not to see for merely personal reasons. In Milan, the blind-spots of Verona emerge as a strategy of disowning knowledge, of characters avoiding the fact that they are themselves being observed and are subject to larger social forces. In the Mantuan Forest, finally, there is less a metamorphosis than a stripping away of Verona and Milan's polite fictions of personal psychology and political power.

John D. Cox, "Who Is Julia? What Is She?"

Despite the play's title emphasis on two men, Julia is the most important character. In many ways, she resembles Rosalind in *As You Like It*: Julia is not only a self-confident young woman who disguises herself as a man but also the principal means by which the man she loves discovers enough self-dignity to be worthy of her in the end. Julia consistently takes initiative when circumstances permit, and her resourcefulness, courage, and intelligence are crucial to the play's comic ending (insofar as it has one). This is especially true in the final scene, where Pope added a stage direction that demeans Julia in a way that F's silence does not.

Sonia Massai, "*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: with and without its Language"

This paper considers how the work of "Two-Gents Productions," a London-based company named after their inaugural production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* at Ovalhouse Theatre in South London in late 2008, queries the distinction between "English Shakespeare" and "Foreign Shakespeare" on the English stage. This company's playfully self-conscious approach to Shakespeare's language offers a unique opportunity to explore the impact of English non-mainstream Shakespeare on mainstream theatrical traditions which are inextricably bound up with dominant "structures of feeling" (Williams [1958] 1989:4) and ideals of "Englishness."

Renfang Tang, "The Woman's Part: Gender and Nationalism in a Chinese Silent *Two Gentlemen of Verona*"

In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia, disguised as a male page, tells Silvia she allegedly dressed in a female attire to play "the woman's part" and thus learned to empathize with women (4.4.160). This example typifies the ambiguities surrounding the portrayals of, and attitudes towards women in Shakespeare. In contrast to Shakespeare's ambiguities, Chinese filmmakers took a clear feminist attitude when it came to dealing

with the gender identity of women in a 1931 silent film derivative of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* entitled *Yi jian mei (A Spray of Plum Blossoms)*. Set in the 1920s China, the film transfigured the Shakespearean comedy to articulate the nationalistic and anti-imperialist sentiment of its time and displaced the themes of fidelity and betrayal in the play into a female-centred frame of narration. The two gentlemen, as Alexander Huang notes, became “silent knights,” while the two ladies emerged as heroic women, who, differing from the docile and subservient woman of Confucian culture, were active, assertive, and embodied a spirit of patriotism. They became role models for the new woman called for by the early period of the Republic of China. Examining “the woman’s part”, I elaborate that the Chinese adaptation reflects nationalist politics and changing concepts of womanhood in early twentieth-century China. The film also provides a rare chance to see Ruan Lingyu, whose role of Julia became a model of the new woman on screen, but whose acting career and life ended in suicide, suggesting that the transformation of the new woman was an irony. As an early Chinese adaptation of Shakespeare, *Yi jian mei* helps today’s audience to learn about the context and the history, from Ruan Lingyu’s suicide to China’s half-century of suffering, making the moment of fun in the comedy worthy of reverence.

William C. Carroll, “Three *Gentlemen of Verona*”

Three recent productions of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* offered very different understandings of the play’s ending, as well as its tone as a whole, reflecting in miniature the long history of the play’s critical interpretation. Each production dealt with the so-called “problems” of the ending – the attempted rape of Silvia, Proteus’s repentance, and Valentine’s forgiveness of Proteus and his “offer” of Silvia to his friend – in ways designed to minimize or erase these “problems.” The 2014 productions at the Folger Theater, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and the Ashland Oregon Shakespeare Festival also saw the play’s issues of gender and friendship in very different ways. In this paper, I describe each production’s main elements briefly before focusing on how each staged the final scene. As different as they were, each production was premised on a similar understanding of audience-actor interaction and supposed ‘improvisation’ which complicated attempts to stage the ending.

Matt Kozusko, “Implied Embedded Stage Directions”

I want to use 5.4 as a test case for question about stage practices in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Immediately following Proteus’s attempted rape of Silvia and subsequent apology, Valentine forgives Proteus, invoking the example of heaven. To demonstrate his earnestness, he then apparently offers the woman he has just saved to the man from whom he has saved her. Before Proteus can respond, however—or perhaps as a means of interrupting the response Proteus is about to make—Julia swoons. Valentine brackets the swooning with two regularly iambic lines, whereas the lines tied directly to the swoon do not comprise a regular iambic line. Typically, iambic lines in Shakespeare are indications of continuous talking and continuous action—a speaker would not pause

in the middle of a regular iambic line, and when two characters have partial lines that add up to a full iambic line, convention dictates a shared full line, with one speaker picking up immediately where the other leaves off. The text invites us to see what we might call an implied embedded stage direction that calls for action(s) that are both meaningful and unscripted.

I want to push back on some of these assumptions to see whether they hold up. In trying to establish something about how such moments in Shakespeare are supposed to work—that is, in speculating about what sort of stage practices they are designed to meet—we tend to rely on arguments about metrics that are difficult to support and, more troublingly, on contemporary stage practices that get silently exported back to the early modern stage as “original.”

James Loehlin, “*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the RSC”

When the Royal Shakespeare Company presented *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in 2014, company publicity made much of the fact that it was the first full main-stage production in 45 years. With a director, Simon Godwin, known for contemporary work, and a young cast mostly making their RSC debuts, the production aimed for a fresh and youthful approach. In later scenes the production worked hard to overcome the play’s notorious difficulties, adopting a darker tone and inventing unscripted action to allow for a tentatively hopeful resolution. The production was a critical and commercial success, and was broadcast to cinemas internationally. My essay considers this most recent production as well as the RSC’s history with the play. While *The Two Gentlemen* had not received a full production in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre since Robin Phillips’s 1970 staging, there had been a number of other versions that found different ways of dealing with the play’s challenges. From John Barton’s odd pairing of the play with *Titus Andronicus* to David Thacker’s *Anything Goes*-style musical version to Edward Hall’s gloomy millennial production, the RSC has found ways of making the play palatable while keeping a slight distance from it. I will explore this history as well as the conceptual, theatrical and rhetorical strategies whereby the company generated a successful return to this most unloved of Shakespeare’s comedies.