

Of Flowers and Weeds. Veering Towards Comedy in Benjamin Victor's Adaptation of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1762)

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In every generation someone is tempted
to make what he can of this poor
little play, and is defeated by it.¹

Ignored by Restoration playwrights, who generally praised Shakespeare's talent but at the same time altered his dramas by largely rewriting them, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* re-emerged on the British stage as late as December 22, 1762, when David Garrick produced it at Drury Lane in the adapted version penned by Benjamin Victor. Theatre manager and writer, Victor was treasurer and deputy manager at the theatre in Smock Alley in Dublin for more than a decade and, after his return to London in 1759, he was appointed treasurer of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, a post which he retained until his death in 1778.

Aided by David Garrick himself, to whose friendship, Victor wrote, «I was greatly obliged [...] as his sole Motive was to do me Service»², the treasurer-playwright embarked on staging Shakespeare's play with «alterations and additions», as the title-page has it. The playtext, published in 1763 by Richard Tonson, is for the most part faithful to Shakespeare's original and Victor's interpolations were primarily aimed at rearranging the order of the scenes, by deleting a few inconsistencies, and polishing up the script. As is well know, this was a common attitude of contemporary adaptors who nested their revisions and variations into the original plays in order to «create a 'perfect' performing text, the kind of text Shakespeare would have written had he been born in the eighteenth century»³. Nevertheless, as we will see, Victor's additions (approximately 150 lines) and some limited, but significant excisions produce a rather momentous swerve of the play's conceptual frame towards a more decidedly comedic track. Indeed, Victor's adaptation ap-

1. C.H. Shattuck (ed.), *John Philip Kemble Promptbooks*, vol. 9: *Twelfth Night, Two Gentlemen, Winter's Tale*, The University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville 1974, «Introduction», p. I.

2. B. Victor, *The history of the theatres of London, from the year 1760 to the present*, Printed for T. Becket in the Strand, London 1771, p. 144.

3. T. Stern, *Shakespeare in Drama*, in F. Ritchie, P. Sabor (eds), *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, p. 148.

pears to match – seemingly better or perhaps just less ambiguously than the Shakespearean original – Northrop Frye’s inclusion of *The Two Gentlemen* into the «drama of the green world»⁴ category, in which the «green world», typically a forest, is where conflicts are resolved and characters undergo some kind of metamorphosis which not only appears to be more apparent in the adaptation but also in tune with an eighteenth-century cultural backdrop.

In 1762, less than seven years before Garrick hallowed the Bard as «the god of our Idolatry»⁵, the attitude towards his plays was already rapidly changing and, unlike their Restoration predecessors, eighteenth-century adaptors were not only fewer but also less (tastelessly) conspicuous in their interventions. The idea that was taking hold in the second half of the century was in fact one of a gradual *canonization* of Shakespeare and his artistic output, which would lead to the poet’s appointment as England’s own. Against this reverential approach, revising Shakespeare’s works may sound rather incongruous, yet, as Michael Dobson argued, «adaptation and canonization are [...] completely mutual activities», even «aspects of the same process»⁶. A similar attitude is perceptible in Benjamin Victor’s own defence of his play included in the Advertisement to the printed edition of *The Two Gentlemen*. In it the author claimed:

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It is the general opinion, that this comedy abounds with weeds; and there is no one, I think, will deny, who peruses it with attention, that it is adorned with several poetical flowers, such as the hand of a Shakespeare alone could raise. The rankest of those weeds I have endeavoured to remove; but was not a little solicitous lest I should go too far, and, while I fancy’d myself grubbing up a weed, should heedlessly cut the threads of a flower⁷.

The gardening metaphor functions here as a vindication both of Shakespeare’s artistry and of the adaptor’s own right to alter, or better, refine the product of it. As Victor himself further explained in his *The history of the theatres of London, from the year 1760 to the present*, published in 1771, changes and adjustments were carried out not only in order to amend the text’s flaws, but also to vindicate the play’s truthful authorship, which some had called into doubt by accusing Shakespeare’s early editors to have «foisted» *The Two Gentlemen* in the Folio «to swell the Volume»⁸. In fact, Victor also wrote, whoever included this drama in the Folio:

4. N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1957, p. 182.

5. D. Garrick, *An ode upon dedicating a building and erecting a statue to Shakespeare, at Stratford upon Avon*, Printed for T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt, London 1769, p. 1.

6. M. Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet. Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Authorship, 1660-1769*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1992, p. 130.

7. B. Victor, *Advertisement*, in W. Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona. A Comedy, Written by William Shakespeare. With Alterations and Additions*, Printed for J. and R. Tonson, in the Strand, London 1763, n.p. All subsequent quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and references to act, scene, and page will be given in the body of the text.

8. B. Victor, *The history of the theatres of London* cit., p. 43.

ought to have been blessed with a true Knowledge of his Author's Genius and Stile; had he been so qualified, he must have seen such evident Marks in many Scenes in the Comedy in question, to have convinced him it was the genuine Hand of that great Master⁹.

Taking Shakespeare's «Genius and Stile» as a given, Victor set out to adapt this early comedy out of reverence towards the Bard's status of «great Master». If *The Two Gentlemen*, he also wrote, «is undoubtedly, one of the most weak and irregular of his Plays»¹⁰, his alterations aimed indeed at letting the Bard's «flowers» excel among the «weeds». His idea was primarily to streamline and regularize the plot, as well as purify its diction by removing some indecencies which may have offended the polite sensibility of contemporary – and especially female – audiences. For example, Julia's *en travesti* role is maintained but the details about her disguise, which she discusses with her maid, no longer involve the mention of a codpiece, an omission apparently not dictated by the mere disappearance of such an ornament from contemporary fashion. But the main variations concern the structure and order of acts and scenes which are heavily rearranged. Most evidently, all the scenes set in Verona are concentrated in Act 1. Thus, Proteus's and Julia's farewell (originally placed in 2.2) is anticipated, and so is the girl's decision to run after her fiancé disguised as a boy, a decision she now makes immediately after they have parted. On the contrary, Launce's funnily lachrymose re-enactment of his adieu to his family is moved forward to Act 2, now entirely set in Milan. As has been pointed out, these changes were probably due to a very practical reason related to the employment of movable scenery, in use since the Restoration, which did not allow for too proximate changes of setting; yet, this newly conceived arrangement may also respond to a demand for some wider logical coherence, for example in that it accords some more time to pass between Valentine's hypothetical arrival at Milan's court and his falling in love with Silvia, which could appear too sudden in the original play. Speaking of coherence, Victor also took pains to remove the little inconsistencies the play has been time and again accused of; for instance, no emperor is mentioned and Milan is graced with a duke only, thus removing the original ambiguity of naming a ruler never to be heard of again in the continuation of the action:

Shakespeare

- ANTONIO: Even with the speediest expedition
I will dispatch him to *the Emperor's court*.
- PANTINO: Tomorrow, may it please you, Don Alfonso
With other gentlemen of good esteem
Are journeying to salute *the Emperor*
And to commend their service to his will.¹¹

9. Ivi, p. 44.

10. Ivi, p. 42.

11. W. Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. by W.C. Carroll, Bloomsbury, London-New

Victor

- ANTHONIO: Ev'n with the speediest expedition,
I will dispatch him to *the court of Milan*.
- PANTHINO: To morrow, may it please you, don Alphonso,
With other gentlemen of good esteem
Are journeying to salute *the royal duke*,
And to recommend their service to his will. (1.2, p. 5; my emphasis)

The sometimes derided line, «My father at the road / Expects my coming, there to see me *shipped*», spoken by Valentine at 1.1.53-4 (my emphasis), possibly picturing Verona as a seaport, is changed to «my father at the gates / Expects my coming, there to see me *mounted*» (1.1, 2; my emphasis), duly restoring the town to its inland position. This meant the excision of Launce's ludicrous "tide/tied" exchange with Pantino in 2.3 which is none the less attuned to the intellectual mood of the day that tended to avoid, limit or even suppress the sometimes vulgar elements of Shakespearean comedy especially¹².

A few additions can also be interpreted as attempts at smoothing some (supposed) wrinkles of the original plot. In Act 1, Launce reveals he has received Julia's letter – the one Proteus is reading when he bumps into his father in Act 1 – from Julia's own hands, which further confirms the provenance of those «sweet lines», but also adds on her characterization as an enterprising and even a bit saucy gal, making her subsequent flight in disguise more credible:

- LAUNCE: [*In a low voice* (to Proteus)] Madam Julia beckon'd from the balcony, and, dropping me with a sweet wink, dropt it into my hat. (1.1, p. 5)

A longer example can be found in Act 2. After Speed has explained to his master the "letter jest" Silvia has just played on him¹³, the girl re-enters, and a brief exchange between her and Valentine lets us understand how far their romance has already gone – much further in fact than what the original suggested at this point:

- VALENTINE: She comes again! her eyes are smiling too!
My dearest Silvia! distract me not with riddles –
I am on the verge of happiness or misery!
Lord Thurio is my rival! a potent one!
Proud of his wealth and power – but, what is worse,
Approv'd, nay chosen, by the duke your father.
- SILVIA: 'Tis true: and that's my grief. But I am free

Delhi-New York-Sydney 2004, 1.3.37-42; my emphasis. All subsequent quotations from Shakespeare's play will be taken from this edition and references to act, scene and line will be given in the body of the text.

12. See on this M. Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet*, cit., p. 129.

13. The scene is nonetheless abridged and Speed's doggerel lines mimicking courtly rhymes are excised, as often happened in contemporary adaptations.

And will not be enslav'd, nor doom'd to wed
That singing, vain, that self-sufficient lord. –
To your protection I submit myself.
VALENTINE: My arms shall be your sanctuary!
I'll lodge you in my bosom, and wear you
[*Lord Thurio is heard singing without.*]
In my heart – Lord Thurio comes!
Let us retire.
SILVIA: We are observ'd – this paper will instruct you.
[*Gives a paper to Valentine, who retires with it to the back of the scene.*]
(2.1, pp. 15-16)

Their love is deep and deeply reciprocated; this exchange, however, is also interesting because it reflects a portrayal of Valentine and Silvia which will prove functional to their later *transformation* in the woods. In Milan, possibly awed by the fashionable chivalric codes that supposedly govern the court as well as by the affluence and authority of the people that rule it, Valentine sounds like an adoring Petrarchan-like lover who speaks by the book but is no man of action. His arms will be Silvia's sanctuary, he says, comparing his embrace to a holy place in which fugitives may be immune to arrest. This solution sounds indeed rather unpractical, since he himself acts like a fugitive (and will soon be one) and is seemingly very much afraid both of the duke's and of Thurio's power (and wealth). He passively declares himself «on the verge of misery» for not being the one Silvia's father has chosen to be his son-in-law and looks intimidated by the socially relevant qualities of his rival as well as by political and paternal authority, which are here made coincide («the duke your father»), enhancing the father's role as a blocking figure. In the same way, his ingenuous promise to «wear» his beloved in his heart is reminiscent of a knight wearing his lady's colours in a tournament, which again tinges his attitude of the conventional and unimaginative hue of one who wishes to fight, as in a knightly tournament, only to display rather than actually prove his prowess. It appears then that his arrival in Milan, which we may imagine as a culturally lively and refined environment, has softened his ways and made him adopt an attitude the contemporaries often criticized. As John Brewer points out in his volume on English culture in the eighteenth century, «polite amusements provided a fig leaf of respectability to cover the naked pursuit of what the critic Bernard Mandeville called 'Lust and Vanity' [...] Culture was too luxurious, too effeminate and too foreign»¹⁴. The cultural sophistication of the city seems therefore to produce an 'emasculating' effect on Valentine which is reminiscent of the worries that alarmed the nation throughout the century with regard with the attacks upon the strength and martial valour of British subjects. «This issue», as Brewer justly foregrounds,

14. J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, Routledge, New York 2013, p. 68.

«was often defined as a struggle between older, indigenous British values and continental foreign ideas of refinement, invading the nation by unmilitary means»¹⁵.

Valentine's faintheartedness is set off by Silvia's strong-willed attitude which is much emphasized by Victor and gestures towards another contemporary issue, that is, the growing importance of women in the intellectual landscape, both as receivers and producers of culture, and in society at large where their role was being, if partially, reconfigured. Victor's Silvia openly declares her independence («I am free») and vigorously refuses to submit to her father's will – which she deems as slavery («will not be enslav'd», she proclaims). Unlike Valentine, who is overwhelmed by «potent» adversaries, Silvia does not abide by paternal decrees, nor is she dazzled by Thurio's wealth, quickly dismissing him as a superficial fop (and the adaptation actually portrays him as more obtusely self-conceited than what he appeared in Shakespeare). Accordingly, before separating from Valentine, it is she who takes the initiative handing him a proper letter of instructions that will allegedly guide their escape. Her attitude mirrors the rising debate over women's role in society which would characterize the Enlightenment when the concern to improve girls' education, and therefore the import of their position in society, rapidly grew, even though the majority of people believed that, while female schooling and culture needed to be advanced, «this education should respect the natural differences between men and women»¹⁶. Educated, and therefore intellectually more self-aware, women could disrupt social mobility and dangerously reassert traditional gender roles; this implied the idea that young women, especially upper class, should never cross the boundaries of a disciplined propriety, that is, the norms of acceptable (public) femininity imposed by male authority, which is also mirrored – as we will see – by the finale of Victor's adaptation.

If these alterations occasion a different and more clear-cut characterization of both Silvia and Valentine, Proteus too undergoes a most significant transformation. As Tiffany Stern correctly points out, according to eighteenth-century aesthetics Shakespeare's «characters changed too much, developing and altering rather than continuing in a steady path that clearly exemplified a fault or extolled a virtue»¹⁷. Borrowing her words, in Victor's *Two Gentlemen* Proteus clearly exemplifies a fault as he represents the scheming and disloyal sort from the first scene of the play. As in Shakespeare, while still in Verona, he sends Valentine's servant Speed to Julia. In the original this behaviour lacks a clearly identifiable reason, whereas Victor provides a villainous explanation for it:

15. Ivi, p. 78.

16. R. Rogers, *Learning to be good girls and women: education, training and schools*, in D. Simonton (ed.), *The Routledge History of Women in Europe Since 1700*, Routledge, London-New York 2006, p. 101.

17. T. Stern, *Shakespeare in Drama*, cit., p. 148. As Stern acutely observes, «much of Shakespeare's very popularity rested on the extent to which he had already been altered and was thus available for further alteration – his texts were seen as fundamentally unfixed, and so free for remoulding and reshaping» (ivi, p. 155).

PROTHEUS: The rogue [Speed] has disappointed me – I sent my letter by him,
That Julia's family might turn their fears on Valentine. (1.1, p. 4)

Rather than to a faithful and devoted lover, this calculating conduct sounds more appropriate to a libertine, who seduces his victims and lets the blame fall on some naïf and trusty fellow.

The import of this alteration also needs to be foregrounded in that it entails a reworking of the play's motivation, which has been defined «both minimal and unfocused»¹⁸. Victor, in fact, possibly with the intent to get rid of yet another weed, operates here what Genette would call «positive motivation», i.e. the introduction of «a motive where the hypotext offered, or at least stated, none»¹⁹. In Shakespeare, Proteus's double reversal, from loving Julia and being Valentine's fraternal friend to pursuing Silvia, his friend's fiancée (and eventually repenting and going back to Julia), is seemingly guided by no reason, except perhaps for the irrationality of love that strikes unexpectedly and erratically. The same behaviour is now ascribable to a recognizable intention due to the character's newly designed personality. Victor, then, implants a motivation that was absent in the original text and activates with it «the *internalization* of an external cause»²⁰. If in Shakespeare Proteus's sudden desire for his friend's fiancée may be imputable to love's capricious nature (an external cause), here his change of mind descends from some internal motive, that is, his rakish ways. Besides, apart from drawing much more attention to the love motif, with the obvious consequence of downplaying the friendship one, this blackening of the villain erases the idea of Proteus as the inexperienced youth who becomes more urban and sophisticated by being in contact with the court and its fashionable as well as devious habits²¹. While in Shakespeare it is in Milan that Proteus transforms into a less innocent and more worldly-wise chap, the adaptation introduces him as a naturally sly and deceitful fellow and has his libertine ways thrive – or better, degenerate – in the city. This, however, is not merely a matter of weeding the Shakespearean garden and, as happened with Valentine's characterization, Proteus's also recalls contemporary anxieties about the fading of the nation's morality. What Brewer writes with regard to the theatre apparently fits the character's treacherous inconstancy, when in Milan he is definitely «led away from [his ...] civic responsibilities [and ...] seduced into a life of pleasure rather than duty»²². In order to re-establish an eventually acceptable and appropriate social

18. C.A. Hallett, «Metamorphosing» *Proteus: Reversal Strategies in The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in J. Schlueter (ed.), *Two Gentlemen of Verona. Critical Essays*, Garland Publishing, London-New York 1996, p. 154.

19. G. Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln-London 1997, p. 324.

20. Ivi, p. 327; emphasis in the original.

21. According to Thomas A. Perry, in Shakespeare «Proteus is no villain in the accepted sense of the world; he is the inexperienced youth being tried and tutored in the world – the Italianate world» (T. Perry, *Proteus, Wry-Transformed Traveller*, in J. Schlueter (ed.), *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, cit., p. 57).

22. J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, cit, p. 77. In 1762 Britain was fighting the Seven

order, then, one in line with the age's obsession with decency and good manners as well as valiancy and masculine nerve, both Proteus, the wicked libertine, and Valentine, the cowardly lover, and, more subtly, Silvia, the determined girl, are in need of reformation. Victor fleshes out this new course by endowing his play with a more decidedly comic swerve that suits the age's tendency «of making Shakespeare more decorous, more suitable to the refined taste of polite society» but also that of seeing him «as the defender of decency» and «associate[ing him] with the defining traits of the British national character»²³.

As mentioned above, in the *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye identified *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* as a specimen of the «drama of the green world», in that «the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green forest, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world»²⁴. In this regard, Jonathan Sircy, in a paper presented at the Shakespeare Association of America annual meeting in Abbotsford in April 2015, claimed that *The Two Gentlemen* «conspicuously fails to match this pattern», since «the play moves from one version of the 'normal' world [Verona] to another more intense version of the 'normal' world [Milan] before ending in the green world»²⁵. Therefore, Sircy maintains, «it is as though the play has skipped to its rhythmic return before undergoing the necessary change»²⁶. In fact, the most significant change, the one which brings about the «comic resolution» happens in the forest when Proteus undergoes his final metamorphosis and falls back in love with Julia as instantly as he fell for Silvia earlier on and therefore is ready to go back to normal, as it were. To be sure, should some sort of non-compliance with Frye's definition of comedy be imputed to the play, it should rather be found in the final arrangement that emerges at its conclusion, which in comedy, according to Frye, should stand as the representative of «a moral norm»²⁷, that is, of a society «that the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs»²⁸. At a closer look, the «one feast, one house, one mutual happiness» (5.4.171) finale is deeply flawed in this sense. Not only, as has been repeatedly pointed out, is Valentine's (in)famous offer of Silvia to his friend «morally and dramatically monstrous»²⁹ – as E.M.W. Tillyard put it –, but so is Julia's

Years' War against France.

23. J.I. Marsden, *The Re-Imagined Text. Shakespeare, Adaptation, & Eighteenth-Century Literary Theory*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 1995, p. 76. Indeed, reviving Shakespeare's plays – Marsden also writes – «was [...] a patriotic act as well as evidence of good taste» (*ibid.*).

24. N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, cit., p. 182; see also N. Frye, *The Argument of Comedy*, in J.L. Calderwood-H.E. Toliver (eds), *Essays in Shakespearean Criticism*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs (NJ) 1970, p. 54.

25. J. Sircy, <http://www.shakespeareassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/The-Two-Gentlemen-of-Verona.pdf> (last accessed December 27, 2019).

26. *Ibid.*

27. N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, cit., p. 169.

28. Ivi, p. 164.

29. E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Early Comedies*, Barnes & Nobles, New York 1965, p. 112. Victor's contemporaries also disliked this turn. Among others, Alexander Pope found it «very odd»,

willingness to reconcile to a faithless lover and what is more a potential rapist. And of course Silvia's mute acceptance to marry a man who was ready to surrender her to a sexual predator is likewise rather preposterous, if not downright disturbing.

For its part, the conclusion of Victor's adaptation seemingly better responds to the idea of a restitution of a «proper and desirable state of affairs», since both the green forest metamorphosis and the comic resolution appear to be more fully realized. The allusion to rape is partially softened by the excision of both the «love you against the nature of love» (5.4.58) and the «I'll force thee yield to my desire» (5.4.59) cues, but more importantly, Valentine's intervention, augmented by way of a few lines, introduces the idea that he has undergone a transformation in the woods too:

PROTHEUS: Nay, if the gentle spirit of moving words
Can no way change you to a milder form,
I'll move you like a soldier, at arms end,
And force you. [He seizes her.]

SILVIA: O Heavens!

VALENTINE: [*comes forward*] Ruffian! let go that rude, uncivil touch!
Thou friend of an ill fashion! Seize him.

PROTHEUS: [*starting.*] Valentine! [*Protheus retires to the side of the scene, guarded, by the Outlaws, and attended by Julia.*]

VALENTINE: My dearest Silvia, [*runs and catches her in his arms.*]
Kind heav'n has heard my fervent prayer!
And brought my faithful Silvia to my arms!
There is no rhetorick can express my joy!

SILVIA: It is delusion all! alas! we dream!
And must awake to wretchedness again!
O Valentine! we are beset with dangers!

VALENTINE: Dismiss those fears, my love, – here, I command!
No power on earth shall ever part us more. (5.2, p. 51)

In contrast with the exchange in Act 2, in which Valentine played the gallant but fearful lover, he shows here a more resolute and authoritative conduct which complies with the contemporary idea of Shakespeare as the «'manly genius' of an earlier, more purely British age»³⁰. Not only does he command the outlaws to seize Proteus, but he immediately runs to Silvia and takes her in his arms. Furthermore, he now dismisses the «rhetorick» of joy on which his discourse previously relied – «I'll lodge you in my bosom, and wear you in my heart», he had said – and claims

especially because it happened «at once without any reason alleg'd» (A. Pope, ed., *The Works of Shakespear*, vol. 1, Jacob Tonson, London 1723, p. 226) and Thomas Hanmer, the fourth editor of Shakespeare's plays in 1743-44, greatly marvelled at Shakespeare making «Valentine act and speak so much out of character; or give Silvia so unnatural a behaviour as to take no notice of this strange declaration if it had been made» (T. Hanmer, ed., *The Works of Shakespear*, vol. 1, J. and R. Tonson, London 1744, p. 190).

30. J.I. Marsden, *The Re-Imagined Text*, cit., p. 76.

to be ready to fight and command. It is a transformation that has taken place in the forest, as Valentine himself seems to underline with deictic force: «[...] *here*, I command!»; while he had previously fearfully withdrew in front of wealth (Thurio's) and authority (the duke's), he now declares that «no power on earth» will ever come between he and Silvia. Indeed, unlike what happened in Milan, it is he who reassures her («Dismiss those fears, my love»); if, on the one hand, this is rather understandable (Silvia has just escaped an attempted rape), on the other, it may allude to a change in the girl's behaviour too. Back in Milan she exhibited independence and self-reliance («I am free and will not be enslav'd», she had stated), while here she is completely crushed by fear and helplessly surrenders to danger. All in all, this scene alludes at the establishment of a social order – possibly a «proper and desirable» one for eighteenth-century viewers – in which men are strong, wise, and forceful, while women are emotionally as well as physically dependent on their companions. In fact, although they have been allowed a certain degree of freedom and self-determination, women's «subordination» – as Kathleen McLuskie would have it – «is a necessary element for the continuation of peace and love and quiet life»³¹.

Upon Valentine's order, Proteus is seized by the Outlaws and the «thou common friend» tirade is maintained by Victor, although it leads a completely different note:

VALENTINE: [...] Oh time accurst!
When, among foes, a friend shou'd be the worst!
Prepare for death.
PROTEUS: My shame and guilt confound me –
[...] I merit death.
JULIA: Ah me, unhappy – [*swoons.*] (5.2, p. 52)

Faithful to his new acquired virile status, Valentine threatens to kill his friend, which totally reverses the Shakespearean turn, erases any residual allusion to the ideal male friendship topic³², developed in the original, and also provides a dramatically sounder reason for Sebastian/Julia's passing out, now caused by her beloved's life being at stake. At this point, Silvia, and not Valentine, has Julia and Proteus shake hands, while Valentine's original 'transfer' of his fiancée to his friend is notably cut. Not only does this excision do away with the shadiness and ambiguity that that offer conveyed, but it also occasions a newly conceived tragic-comic contiguity which the Shakespearean finale problematically maintained in Silvia's eventual silence³³. As Michael Friedman justly noticed, in Victor, «Silvia may pos-

31. K.E. McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, Humanities Press International, Atlantic Highlands (NJ) 1989, p. 5.

32. This also implies the total deletion of any homoerotic hue with regard to the Valentine-Proteus relationship.

33. As is well known, Silvia speaks her last cue («Oh heaven! ») at 5.4.59, right after Proteus attempts at raping her and sinks into silence thereafter.

sess a voice [...], but in the absence of Valentine's offer, she loses her most compelling reason to use it»³⁴. Indeed, rather than rescuing Silvia from being hushed, the suppression of the notorious «All that was mine in Silvia I give thee» (5.4.83) line agrees with and foregrounds Valentine's newly acquired/restored masculinity, whose righteousness stands here as conquering over Proteus' libertinism.

In Victor, the hiatus between a potentially tragic turn (here signified by Proteus risking to be killed by Valentine) and the reconciliatory happy ending is much more sharply defined, making the eventual comic resolution undeniably dominating over any generic promiscuousness. The finale re-establishes the correct pairing of the couples and also literally rescues Proteus (and the play) from a tragic ending. Proteus readily repents and asks for forgiveness and can therefore be included in the (acceptable) social order that is re-established in the forest. Libertines are reformed and righteous men reaffirm their authority over self-willed girls, dutifully tamed into obedient brides. Accordingly, Proteus soon declares himself to be «a poor penitent» (5.2, p. 53) and the play closes with him speaking a couplet that seals the return to a morally sound society: «A convert to this truth I stand confess'd, / That lovers must be faithful to be bless'd» (5.2, p. 55).

It is a general blessing indeed from which no one is excluded, not even Speed and Launce to whom Victor assigns an additional scene in the woods. Launce, who has followed his master in the forest and has been earlier taken prisoner by the outlaws, is tricked by Speed, disguised as one of the bandits, into thinking that either he or his dog, Crab, will be killed:

LAUNCE: Ah, dear sir, – I cannot die – nor can I live, if you kill my poor Crab (5.2, p. 54)

At Launce's reaction, everybody «burst into a laughter» – as the stage direction has it – and Speed reveals himself to his amazed fellow:

SPEED: [*uncovers.*] Why, Launce! why the fright you are in about dying, takes away your eye-sight! why you can't see your best friends? Permit me, my dear Launce, to welcome you to the forest. [*Takes his hand.*] (5.2, p. 54)

Launce is overwhelmed with joy at the reunion and is pardoned for the trouble Crab and himself have caused – «all here are friends» (5.2, p. 55), Valentine tells him.

As in the original drama, this new scene played by the two servants works as a parallel that illustrates and extends the dramatized themes³⁵ and accordingly reproduces a parodic version of Sebastian's revelation as Julia; in Shakespeare no

34. M.D. Friedman, "To be slow in words is a woman's only virtue": *Silence and Satire in The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in J. Schlueter (ed.), *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, cit., p. 216.

35. For a discussion of the function of Lance and Speed (and Crab) in Shakespeare's play, see H.F. Brooks, *Two Clowns in a Comedy (to say nothing of the Dog): Speed, Launce (and Crab) in The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in J. Schlueter (ed.), *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, cit., pp. 71-78.

such parallel was included in the final act and such addition ultimately confirms of this eighteenth-century adaptation's unequivocal transformation into sheer comedy. In the «green world» of Victor's forest – and Speed specifically welcomes his friend «to the forest» – the metamorphosis is totally and more comprehensively accomplished: lovers become heroic, rakes are reformed, independent girls are disciplined, silly servants (and their dogs) are pardoned, and everyone is eventually ready to depart and go back to the «normal world».

It is no coincidence that in the following decades, it is exactly this reforming function of the forest that got accentuated. In 1790 and again 1808, John Philip Kemble staged *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, respectively. The text he adopted, and of which he published the acting version in 1808 and 1815, was largely based on Victor's adaptation, which Kemble slightly modified entering a few cuts and variations, mainly dictated by a stronger puritanical attitude. This may also explain a brief addition in the last act in which Proteus's conversion is not represented as a change of mind, nor as a return to reason, but rather as the deliverance from a spell thus erasing all agency on the characters' part. Earlier described by Launce as a place «inhabited by goblins, [and] monsters with three throats»³⁶, Kemble's forest is indeed a site of magic, and when Julia uncovers her identity, the spell is ready to be broken, as Proteus himself exclaims:

saggi

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The magick spell dissolves that dimm'd my sight,
And my true day-spring dawns to me again³⁷.

The struggle between conscience and desire that led Proteus to betray both Julia and Valentine in order to conquer Silvia is here dismissed as mesmerization which ultimately the forest dispels. The ambiguous shades that Shakespeare, although a bit tentatively himself, had introduced in his play are definitively erased, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is transformed, even metamorphosed into a comic fairy-tale, and not a very successful one either. If Victor's drama had a rather short run of five nights, Kemble's was even less successful (both in 1790 and 1808). Veering towards comedy was not a good idea after all, and the result, as a nineteenth-century commentator put it, looked very much as «Samson shorn of his vigour, and trifling in the flowery lap of Dalilah»³⁸.

36. J.P. Kemble, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in C.H. Shattuck (ed.), *John Philip Kemble Prompt-books*, cit., p. 63.

37. Ivi, p. 67.

38. J. Boaden, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble, Esq.*, vol. 2, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, London 1825, p. 448.