

## ***The Two Gentlemen of Verona in Shakespeare in Love:* Intertextual Relations and their Role in Meaning-Making**

**Ilaria RIZZATO\***

### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to explore the relationship between Shakespeare's early comedy The Two Gentlemen of Verona and John Madden's film Shakespeare in Love. To this end, first of all, it will examine the role played by direct quotations of text from The Two Gentlemen and the significance of the fictional staging of the comedy in the film. Moreover, it will identify themes, imagery and elements of characterisation from The Two Gentlemen exploited by the film and explain how they contribute to the latter's dramatic development. Further, it will highlight situational parallelism between play and film and attempt an explanation of its functions. Finally, it will seek to integrate the above-mentioned aspects with a view to illustrating the picture of The Two Gentlemen as emerging from Shakespeare in Love: a highly mediated picture, where romantic love and comical excess are foregrounded at the expense of other equally important features of the play, such as risqué eroticism and highly refined wordplay.*

**Keywords:** Shakespearean comedy, film, intertextuality, signification, multimodality

This paper looks at the role played by *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* [1] in *Shakespeare in Love*, the 1998 film directed by John Madden and based on the screenplay by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard [2]. Such a role is constructed at many levels, the most obvious of which is that of direct quotation of text from the comedy, which will be analysed as the first and most basic way of establishing an intertextual relationship between the two works. The second level of analysis will focus on themes, imagery and characterisation in the film which appear to have *The Two Gentlemen* as a source, so as to emphasise the further contribution of the play to the motion picture. Thirdly, scenes or situations from the comedy that are recognisably paralleled by the film will be commented on so as to identify their function in the film.

All direct quotations from *The Two Gentlemen's* text appear at an early stage in the film. The first mention of the full title occurs in the scene hosting the first dialogue between the character of William Shakespeare, referred to as Will in the film (and henceforward in this paper), and the theatre manager Henslowe. While Henslowe is trying to convince Will to complete the comedy he has promised to him, Will replies he is still awaiting payment for *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Thus, the audience is informed that this play has already been completed, which presents it as a background element to the current development of filmic action.

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\* Lecturer in English Language and Translation. University of Genoa, Italy.  
 ilaria.rizzato@unige.it

The text is referred to again when Will comes to Whitehall Palace and, in what appears to be a backstage area, he meets the actor William Kempe [3], dressed and made up as a clown, with a dog. Will addresses the dog as Crab, which is the same name Lance's dog has in *The Two Gentlemen*. This could suggest that Will is using the animal's 'stage name' either because he is not familiar with his real name or because the dog is about to go on stage to perform and should, therefore, be called by the name of his character. This, however, could also suggest that the dog in the play has been named after, and presumably inspired by, a real one, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, Kempe states that "Crab is nervous. He's never played the palace" (Norman and Stoppard 1998: 13), which refers to the 'real' dog rather than the character. Secondly, and most important, there are other scenes in the film which appear to explain the origin of Shakespearean characters' names on the basis of Will's 'real-life' situations, for example when Marlowe proposes the name Mercutio for a character in Will's next play (as well as a significant part of the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*), or at the end of the film, when Will names the heroine of the comedy he is about to write, *Twelfth Night*, after the love of his life, Viola. These similarities seem to support the idea that the film represents the dog's name in the comedy as inspired by the 'real' dog's name, which seems to be very unrealistic, as the name Crab for the dog in the play seems to have been chosen because it means "sour," and therefore because it expresses the unfriendly temper and unfeeling attitude the animal is supposed to have in the play [4]. This mention of Crab, however, also announces that *The Two Gentlemen* is about to be staged [5].

The sequence devoted to the show begins with the arrival of the Queen and alternates shots of the actors on stage with takes of the audience and of other characters in the backstage area. Text quoted from *The Two Gentlemen* is to be heard during such takes, more distinctly in the former case, less so in the latter.

The first quotation is Valentine's incipit, "Cease to persuade, my loving Proteus" (I.1.1), which is pronounced by the character to the right in the frame, as seen from the back of the stage, as if to introduce this place as a source of point of view. Immediately after this first, distinctly audible line, in fact, the camera moves backstage where Will is. Text from the play can still be perceived as background noise:

VALENTINE

Home-keeping youth have ever homely wits.  
 Were't not affection chains thy tender days  
 To the sweet glances of thy honoured love,  
 I rather would entreat thy company  
 To see the wonders of the world abroad  
 Than, living dully sluggardized at home,  
 Wear out thy youth with shapeless idleness.  
 But since thou lov'st, love still, and thrive therein-  
 Even as I would, when I to love begin.

PROTEUS

Wilt thou be gone? Sweet Valentine, adieu.  
 Think on thy Proteus when thou haply seest  
 Some rare noteworthy object in thy travel.  
 Wish me partaker in thy happiness  
 When thou dost meet good hap; and in thy danger –  
 If ever danger do environ thee  
 Commend thy grievance to my holy prayers;  
 For I will be thy beadsman, Valentine (I.1.2-18).

This long quotation, however, is barely audible, and just provides a background to the conversation between Will and his lover Rosaline in which he asks her to become his muse. In this sequence, then, the exchange between lovers is foregrounded, whereas quoted text does not seem to attract much attention. Will's remark on the audience plotting against him because they cough during his play seems to diminish both the seriousness of the bond between Rosaline and him and the status of the comedy to the eyes of at least one of its spectators [6].

Coughing provides an auditory as well as a visual link to the next set up, showing the Queen coughing and having some food, her eyes first averted from stage, and then looking at it again. The next frame shows Kempe onstage as Lance, speaking these lines from the famous parting scene:

My mother weeping, my father wailing, [...] our maid howling, our cat wringing her hands [...] yet did not this cruel-hearted cur shed one tear (II.3.6-9).

When the words "our cat wringing her hands" are uttered, the camera take leaves Lance to move to Crab barking, and then to the Queen again, who is now laughing out loud. These parallel visual inputs of the Queen, separated only by Lance's and Crab's close-ups, emphasise what is different in each of them: the Queen's mood, changing from being absent-minded to being amused. In other words, a cause and effect relationship between Lance and Crab's acting and the Queen's loud laughter is established. Then Lance is shown fumbling with the dog lead and stumbling as Crab pulls at it, which makes the audience roar with laughter, along with the Queen. This view of the audience also provides a chance to display a close-up of the protagonist Viola, sincerely amused, and of Lord Wessex, who remains dark and silent.

Then Lance and Crab becoming more and more tangled up in the dog lead are in focus again, and the Queen is shown laughing even louder, her laughter rising above everybody else's in the room. The implicature this sequence creates is that the more clownish the performance, the more intense the Queen's – and the public's in general – pleasure. The same conclusion is reached by Henslowe, who says to Will Shakespeare, sitting in the back of the room with him: "You see? Comedy. Love and a bit with a dog, that's what they want" [7]. But Will's face expression suggests that his opinion is different.

As Lance recites the following lines from the same scene

He is a stone, a very pebble-stone, and has no more pity in him than a dog. A Jew would have wept to have seen our parting. [...] Now the dog all this while sheds not a tear nor speaks a word (II.3.9-12),

the camera closes up on Wessex, who looks at Viola, and then on Viola herself. At first she is laughing, but as she turns to the back of the room and catches a glimpse of Will Shakespeare, grave and unsmiling, her face also saddens. Here the contrast between the audience's mirth and the comic scene, on the one hand, and Will's seriousness, on the other, is meaningful: it presumably conveys that Will is not at ease with this type of comicality. Then the Queen's praise goes to Crab, to whom she throws a sweetmeat, under the astonished eyes of Lance/Kempe.

The quotation closing the scene on the staging of *The Two Gentlemen* is from Act III, scene 1. The Duke has just banished Valentine from Milan, and the latter, remaining alone on stage, laments that life makes no sense to him without Silvia:

What light is light, if Silvia be not seen?  
 What joy is joy, if Silvia be not by –  
 Unless it be to think that she is by,  
 And feed upon the shadow of perfection.  
 Except I be by Silvia in the night  
 There is no music in the nightingale (III.1.174-179).

As the actor playing Valentine delivers line 174, he is in close-up, his posture and diction seemingly contrived. As he moves on to lines 175-176, the Queen is again in view, as seen from the by now familiar angle, but this time she closes her eyes and starts napping. As Valentine reaches lines 177-179, however, a high-angle close-up of Viola's face is shown: she is mouthing Valentine's words, with a participating, moved expression.

To explain how the above-mentioned text quotations contribute to the construction of meaning in the film, it may be useful to look at the selection of passages operated. Selection, in fact, implies both compression of a more extended text and more focus on the parts selected as opposed to those left out. And focus means importance: the selected parts must be important building blocks of meaning to the text in which they appear – that is, *Shakespeare in Love*. Moreover, selection implies motivation: understanding why a scene has been chosen out of all others and which aspects of it have been foregrounded may tell us much about the ideas the film wishes to convey.

To sum up, the quotations appearing in the scene of the staging of the play are:

- the opening dialogue between Valentine and Proteus;
- the famous parting scene with Lance and the dog Crab;
- Valentine's love monologue.

Not all three quotations gain the same prominence to the viewer. The opening dialogue, for example, is mostly not audible, except for the very first line,

which is also the only one pronounced with the actors being visible onstage. The rest of the passage is just background noise to the love dialogue between Will and Rosaline. Therefore, the themes introduced by the first scene of *The Two Gentlemen* (friendship, travelling as a form of education, as opposed to love as a form of imprisonment) are not made accessible to the film viewer, unless s/he already knows the play in detail, which is very unlikely, both because the comedy is one of Shakespeare's less renowned works, and because the film addresses the widest audience possible, rather than one of academics or connoisseurs of Renaissance literature. Thus, the function of this quotation seems to be simply that of announcing the beginning of the play.

Lance's parting scene, on the other hand, appears to be much more prominent, indeed the most prominent of the three staged scenes. It is one of the most famous passages in *The Two Gentlemen*, considered one of the best pieces of comic prose in the canon (Farnham 1971, Weimann 1989). What is foregrounded in the film, however, is not the textual element, but its extreme buffoonish quality, represented through Kempe's exaggerated playing, his clown's dress and make up, and the grotesque presence of the dog, not to mention the enthusiastic reaction of the audience, and particularly of the Queen, at their performance. The comment uttered by Henslowe during this scene, "Comedy. Love and a bit with a dog, that's what they want" puts into words what the picture is expressing visually – with the exception of "love," for which we will have to wait until the next quotation. Will's unconvinced face and pondering attitude, however, suggests that he does not agree with Henslowe. His attitude, in contrast with the comic moment in the play and with the audience's wild laughter and clear satisfaction, seems to imply that this piece, and particularly this kind of comedy, is not a source of satisfaction for him as it is for his public, and that he aspires to higher, more inspired achievements in writing.

A similarly reductive image of the *Two Gentlemen* as a comedy is also obtained through what is left out of the quotations. The portion of text between "shed one tear" and "He is a stone," which has been skipped in the film, is probably the main reason why this monologue is so famous. It includes, in fact, the passage where Lance uses his shoes, a stick and the dog to impersonate the members of his family and himself in the account of his parting from them. This passage in the comedy relies on gesture, true, to use the comical potential of props to their full – part of a popular tradition, dating back to the Middle Ages (Weimann 1989) – but also on witty wordplay, as is the case with Lance's description of his mother:

No, no, this left shoe is my mother. Nay, that cannot be so, neither. Yes, it is so, it is so, it hath the worser sole (II.3.15-17).

"Worser sole" can be read in at least three ways: literally, as the more worn-out lower part of the shoe; with a pun only on "sole" and its perfect homophone "soul," referring to the ancient belief that women were endowed with lesser

spiritual gifts than men; finally, with a pun on both words, sounding very close to “whore’s hole,” an extremely obscene image, especially if referred to one’s mother. However gross the image evoked, this pun is an instance of very skilful writing and of refined wordplay, associated with the most appreciated verse by Shakespeare rather than with a popular tradition based on cheaply bought laughter. Leaving this out of the filmed stage makes it much easier to represent this passage as somewhat poor.

What is left out of the film obviously extends to the many other comic scenes in the play which have not been selected for quotation. *The Two Gentlemen*, in fact, presents a very rich comic apparatus, featuring not only the sole example of animal character in the canon, but also two clowns rather than the usual one: Speed, Valentine’s servant, as well as Lance (Brooks 1963). Moreover, comic effects are often achieved even by characters who are not clowns. In most cases, a rich, highly skilful use of wordplay is responsible for comicality in a way that is not inferior to that of the major comedies by the Bard.

For these reasons, *Shakespeare in Love* appears unfair to *The Two Gentlemen’s* comic vigour, a choice which seems to be prompted by the need to justify Will’s new interest in tragedies, as his next, much celebrated work will be *Romeo and Juliet*, around which this film revolves.

As for Valentine’s monologue, it finally introduces the important element of love on stage. It represents a very lyrical moment in the play, using the conventions of courtly love poetry to picture an idealised love feeling. The static posture of the actor and the fact that the Queen has fallen asleep during this passage seem to suggest it may not be too appealing. But the close-up on Viola knowing every word of it subverts this view: cold acting and the Queen’s preference for comic pieces appear to be part of the problem, whereas Valentine’s lines, which have conquered the girl’s heart, seem to express love poetry convincingly. On the whole, a positive image of the amorous element in *The Two Gentlemen* seems to emerge, although it is again quite a reductive one. In the comedy, love is multifaceted, as the character of Proteus, named after the priapic Greek god, testifies (Coronato 2005, Scuderi 2012, 2013): ideal, poetic feelings live together with erotic impulse, obscene suggestions and rape instincts.

This positive but limited picture of love in *The Two Gentlemen* features again in the audition scene, where Viola, as Thomas Kent, proposes as an audition piece the same passage from Valentine’s monologue, extended by the following lines:

Except I be by Silvia in the night  
 There is no music in the nightingale.  
 Unless I look on Silvia in the day  
 There is no day for me to look upon.  
 She is my essence, and I leave to be  
 If I be not [...] (III.1.178-183).

As she rehearses these lines, the camera closes more and more on her, and her words and face expression become more and more passionate. Quotation of the same text makes it compulsory to draw a comparison between its two performances. Thomas's/Viola's is much more convincing, which reinforces the positive idea of love verse in *The Two Gentlemen*, and the suggestion that Will's writing has already expressed love effectively, but has not found the right interpreter, audience and play that can make it thrive. As the film displays the making of *Romeo and Juliet*, this may also suggest that the play is good inasmuch as it anticipates the more famous tragedy. Such a perspective, however, seems to obscure some of the successful aspects of the play celebrated even by those who have expressed reservations on it. Some critics, for example, lamented the play's problems in structure and characterisation (Wilson 1969), especially in the final act (Small 1933), but amply recognised not only the intensity of its lyrical excerpts, but also the quality of its comic force (Wells 1963, Wilson 1969). The film, however, does not refer to structure and characterisation at all, and uses the other two prominent features (love lyrics and comicality) in a simplified manner, serving the needs of the film plot, which aims at a final, triumphant staging of *Romeo and Juliet* seen as the quintessence of love on stage – which is obviously somewhat reductive of the tragedy as well. In other words, the selection of quotes made and the way they appear to be treated in the film foreground romantic love in *The Two Gentlemen* as an anticipation of Will and Viola's passionate affair, materialised on stage as that of Romeo and Juliet, and present a limited view of its comical effects as they are not to be further developed in the tragedy.

*Shakespeare in Love*, however, owes more to *The Two Gentlemen* than it states through quotations from it. A number of themes and elements of imagery and characterisation are drawn from the comedy. First of all, Viola cross-dressing makes clear intertextual reference to a character in *The Two Gentlemen* who does not appear on stage in the performance, nor is explicitly mentioned at any point in the film: Julia. Julia is the most fascinating female character in the play; dressed as a page, she embarks on an adventure a woman of the time could never have experienced. She travels to Milan to follow the man who has promised eternal love to her, Proteus, and there witnesses his betrayal and meets her rival, Silvia. Her disguise places her in a vantage point from which she can get to know the other characters' feelings and intentions to a very high degree. Also Viola's cross-dressing allows her to follow her lover and experience adventures forbidden to women – joining a company of actors – but the psychological depth and complexity reached by Julia's part is never evoked in *Shakespeare in Love*.

The name Viola for the film protagonist clearly points to the *Twelfth Night's* heroine introduced in the film ending; then, the latter comedy could be the sole source of Viola's camouflage. There are elements in the film, however, supporting the hypothesis that Julia also had an influence on the film female protagonist. The scene in which the nurse asks Viola whether she liked Proteus or Valentine best, informs her that Wessex was looking at her during the show, and talks about love with her, clearly parallels the scene in which Lucetta, Julia's waiting woman, gives

advice to Julia on which of her admirers she should bestow her love on (I.2.1-32). In the next film scene in which Viola is alone with the nurse, she tells her: "As you love me and as I love you, you will bind my breast and buy me a boy's wig!" (Norman and Stoppard 1998: 41); thus, she echoes Julia's pledge: "Gentle Lucetta, fit me with such weeds/As may beseeem some well-reputed page" (II.6.42-43).

If the device of cross-dressing originates from Julia, Viola also borrows from Silvia, as she is promised by her family to a gentleman she despises, Lord Wessex, for reasons of interest, but loves another man. In *The Two Gentlemen*, however, the villain her father wants to marry Silvia to is Thurio, a man of fortune, whereas in the film Viola has the money and her family covets Lord Wessex's title. The man Silvia loves is obviously Valentine, who, differently from Will Shakespeare, comes from a good family and, even when banished and deprived of his status, gets a chance to prove his worth and courage to Silvia's father (V.4). Will, on the other hand, is never given that chance in the film: his social status prevents him from being a possible suitor for Viola, without any right of appeal.

Some situations in the play are also paralleled by the film more loosely. The similarity of the exchanges between Julia and Lucetta and Viola and her nurse has been mentioned above. Then there is the unveiling of Thomas Kent's identity through Tilney, Master of the Revels, which is remindful of the Duke's unmasking of Valentine and of his plans to take Silvia away from Milan and marry her against his father's will (III.1.58-138). The two scenes seem to be related because both involve disguise. Valentine is in fact hiding a rope under his cloak, with which he intends to climb the tower where Silvia is to set her free. The notion of 'disguise,' however, is very different in the two works. In *The Two Gentlemen*, Valentine's disguise does not imply a radical change of physical appearance to conceal his identity, since it is just meant to conceal his intention of using a rope ladder to reach Silvia's room in the tower. In *Shakespeare in Love*, on the other hand, Viola uses indeed all the means possible – a wig, a false moustache, male clothes – to conceal her identity and to pass for an actor in Will's show.

In addition, it may be worth pointing out that in both *The Two Gentlemen* and *Shakespeare in Love* betrayal plays an important part in exposing what is hidden behind the 'mask': in Shakespeare's comedy, Valentine's intentions are revealed by his treacherous friend Proteus, who informs the Duke of Valentine's plans, whereas in the film, the young John Webster, driven by the desire to take revenge on Will Shakespeare, reveals Thomas Kent's true identity to Mr. Tilney.

A further element of similarity is that, in both works, the unmasking causes the two lovers to stay apart, until they are unexpectedly reunited towards the end of the play.

In *Shakespeare in Love*, this particular episode is echoed again after the representation of *Romeo and Juliet*, when Tilney recognises Viola as Juliet and accuses her of being a woman before the whole audience. This time, though, the Queen gives the lie to him, and saves Viola from punishment and the theatre from closing by declaring that the player is actually a man, in spite of his remarkable



resemblance to a woman. In this situation, Viola, a woman dressed as a woman and playing the part of a woman, is said by the Queen to be a man very convincingly disguised as a woman. The complexity of the situation is reminiscent of Julia's dialogue with Silvia (V.2.155-169), in which the former, playing the part of a page, tells the latter that "he" once played a woman's part, Ariadne's, wearing Julia's clothes, and moved Julia to tears with "his" most intense impersonation of a woman abandoned by her man (as Julia is by Proteus). This is one of the most intriguing passages featuring Julia, and one of the most successful in *The Two Gentlemen*, its force relying on the synergy between the dramatic situation in which Julia is and the power of the intertextual reference: the myth of Ariadne and Theseus, foregrounding Julia's pain and sense of abandonment. *Shakespeare in Love* does not seem to strike such a high chord, also because the mixture of gender identities is merely part of a narrative device aimed at re-establishing the balance reached by dramatic action: Viola will not incur punishment, but leave for America with her husband Wessex as planned, and Will Shakespeare will not see his theatre closed, but enjoy the success just gained with *Romeo and Juliet*, the play that has shown, in the Queen's words, "the very truth and nature of love" (Norman and Stoppard 1998: 148).

Thus, representing *Romeo and Juliet* as the first and best representation of love by Shakespeare may be considered among the main objectives of the film, if not the main one. In the light of this objective, it may be easier to explain why the picture of *The Two Gentlemen* provided by the film appears to be rather diminutive: partially 'downplaying' the latter may effectively serve the purpose of celebrating the former. Foregrounding mainly folk or grotesque aspects of comedy may further the noble elegance of tragedy. Moreover, representing love verse ambiguously may well suggest it contains the roots of the splendour to come, but in an underdeveloped form. In this sense, *The Two Gentlemen* appears as a juvenile, unsatisfactory attempt at writing something as great and immortal as *Romeo and Juliet*. Similarly, the love scene with Will and Rosaline during the staging of the first scene of *The Two Gentlemen*, appears as a juvenile, failed attempt at finding true love, the love that Will Shakespeare will find in Viola/Juliet.

This reductive picture seems to emerge when *The Two Gentlemen* is quoted explicitly. But when the film uses it as a source for one of its major aspects, Viola's cross-dressing, responsible for a large part of its dramatic development, the debt to *The Two Gentlemen* is by no means recognised. It is very unlikely for the viewer, then, to figure out that the film owes, at least in part, this exquisite trait to the comedy, unless s/he already knows it. And as cross-dressing is a feature of more famous plays by Shakespeare, such as *Twelfth Night*, of which there is explicit mention in the play, viewers are likely to see the source for this elsewhere, although intertextuality, as stated above, seems to support the interpretation of Julia as a model for the film character of Viola.

Thus, the tribute *Shakespeare in Love* pays to *The Two Gentlemen* appears to be somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, it draws abundantly from it, but, on the other, it presents as imperfect aspects of the play that are widely recognised as

brilliant (lyricism, comic prose), totally erases some of its major strengths (linguistic achievement, especially in wordplay) and fails to pay its dues to it for one of its most important ideas (Julia's dressing as a page). In a word, the image of *The Two Gentlemen* is highly manipulated to serve the main purpose of the film, and only that: extolling the virtues of *Romeo and Juliet* as the quintessential representation of true love.

### Notes

[1] Henceforward abbreviated as *The Two Gentlemen*. The exact date when the play was written is unknown, but it is usually located between 1590 and 1594.

[2] This analysis focuses on the film as an audiovisual product rather than on the screenplay.

[3] William Kempe was one of the most beloved clowns of the age and featured in a number of later plays by the Bard.

[4] The origin not only of names, but also of a variety of textual elements is explained in the film through very unrealistic episodes in Shakespeare's life, a strategy which is presumably meant to produce irony.

[5] Crab is the only dog in the canon (Wells 2005: 1).

[6] This is another example of filmic irony resulting from episodes invented by the scriptwriters, as Will angrily comments on the performance being disturbed by spectators coughing, without knowing that the 'culprit' is actually the Queen herself.

[7] Here the film significantly diverges from the script, the corresponding line reading: "Love and a bit with a dog, that's what they like" (Norman and Stoppard 1998: 18).

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