ROMANTICISM IN SHAKESPEARIAN COMEDY?

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It is a common place of criticism to label Shakespeare's comedies romantic comedies. What else should one call comedies which are set in Illyria or in forests of Arden, and through which Violas and Orsinos, Rosalinds and Orlandoos fleet the time to such music as is the food of love? And what is a fantasia like The Midsummer Night's Dream but the very ecstasy of romanticism? So the epithet goes unquestioned. It not only seems to fit the quality of Shakespeare's comedies; it catches in a word the prevailing atmosphere of Elizabethan literature at large. And for what concerns comedy in particular, it has an additional recommendation. Being named "romantic comedies," Shakespeare's can be easily and conveniently distinguished from the counterblasts with which, in the name of the classical comedians, Ben Jonson retaliated on them. Why not, therefore, let well alone, and continue to talk of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, especially as "romantic" is so variable and vague in its connotation that it can be used to mean almost anything which anybody may take Shakespeare's comedies to be.

Moreover, there can hardly be any doubt that Shakespeare's audience clamorously demanded that their comedies should include certain features which in any sense of the word must be called romantic, features which enter comedy for the first time in Shakespeare's day, features which more than any others bear the stamp of the imaginative and emotional fashion of his generation.

His Comedy of Errors provides an excellent clue to the taste of his times. He took the main tale of it from Latin comedy, from

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Plautus. But he made strange additions. His Plautine material is in the boisterous, gross, realistic pattern of Latin comedy: a virago of a wife, a thick-skinned husband, and a common courtesan deal with each other in the coarser way of earthy trafficking. But into this Hogarthian group Shakespeare slips one or two figures who belong to another world: an old man weighed down by the grief of many years' fruitless search for the wife and son torn from him by shipwreck, and a gentle-hearted girl whose lips speak in the sweet new style singers and sonneteers were consecrating to lovers and to love-making.

Such incongruously intrusive figures can only have gained their entry by being the sort of people Shakespeare's public wanted. They surround a Dutch interior with a tale of love and of adventure; and what is a romance but a tale of love and adventure, of prouesse and courtesie? That is the justification for calling the Elizabethan age a romantic age. Shakespeare and his fellows were romantic in the strict sense that they clamoured for fuller draughts of that spirit of romanticism which the Middle Ages had first discovered and revealed in their tales of chivalry and knight-errantry. To them, a lover and his lass were the most engrossing of God's creatures: their comedies as Jonson contemptuously said, had to be of a duke in love with a countess, the countess to be in love with the duke's son, and the son to love the lady's waiting-maid, with other such cross-wooing. For wooing was the most exciting of man's emotional experiences; and tuned to that key he eagerly responded to those other phases of existence wherein the stress of exceptional circumstances aroused stranger stirrings of the passionate life. The plot of the Comedy of Errors is Roman, classical, realistic; but old Aegeon and fair Luciana are the offspring of an un-Roman, unclassical and unrealistic sentiment: they are the outcome of romance. Of the two, Luciana is the more significant.

Romantic comedy is pre-eminently the comedy of love. It is its specific occupation with wooing which distinguishes it most markedly from classical or Roman comedy. And although between a fully grown romantic comedy such as As You Like It, and a Roman comedy such as the Menachmi of Plautus, there may appear to be the widest difference in matter and in spirit, the one has in fact grown out of the other by a gradual modification of the current view of the way of a man with a maid. Classical dramatists dealt freely with
amorous intrigues between young men and girls; but solicitation is a social institution, whereas wooing is a mystical experience. The Romans treated such situations as mere incidents in the usual sowing of wild oats, which was by no means a bad training for a young fellow about to enter the world at large. Their real concern was with the older men who had already taken rank in that world. When modern comedy started in Italy at the beginning of the sixteenth century, its founders eagerly imitated classical models. But in the intervening sixteen hundred years, man and his universe had moved. He had been initiated into notions of chivalry. Italian audiences in 1500 were descended from knights who had given their lives to courtesy and to high endeavour. Dante had transmuted womankind for them. He had opened their eyes to the image of woman whose coming is as from heaven to reveal a miracle, and at the sound of whose voice the heart is filled with all of sweetness and humility:

E par che sia una cosa venuta
Di cielo in terra a miracol mostrare...

Ogni dolcezza, ogni pensiero umile
Nasce nel core a chi parlar la sente.

Merely to see her is to add to one's spiritual stature a new susceptibility, an "intelligenza nuova." By the simple glance of her eye mankind is lifted to a finer civilisation: "empiendo il core a ciascun di virtute." Perhaps such a transcendent "intellect of love" was too ideal for the sense of the bulk of men. But Petrarch had made the miracle manifest on earth. He had clothed the new soul of woman in the human beauty of woman's body:

ogni virtute
Ogni bellezza, ogni real costume
Giunti in un corpo a mirabil tempre—

and had made her earthly existence more intimate by turning from the idea she symbolised in heaven to lament the heaviness of life when the transfiguring angel of it departs, leaving her lover a desolate and solitary voyager on the dreary waves of time.

With these new sensations pulsing in their blood, Italy's audiences in the sixteenth century were much more thrilled by youth than by age, and youth in love was its most alluring theme. Its comic writers might set themselves to imitate Roman drama as closely as possible;
but without knowing it, they could not escape dallying with the young folks of the play far more than Roman precedent warranted. At the very outset of the new comedy, for his Calandria, Bibbiena borrows largely from the self-same play of Plautus from which Shakespeare was to borrow for his Comedy of Errors. But Bibbiena, taking his twins from Plautus, transforms one of them into a woman, as the later Shakespeare was to do for his Twelfth Night. And in Ariosto's comedies, the young gradually supersede the old, until the old man, who stood in the middle limelight of Roman comedy, is pushed into the wings of the stage to make room for the youthful lovers whose Roman prototypes were but accessory figures. The plot of his Cassaria is a typically classical plot, except that the old man has at the beginning embarked on a journey which keeps him out of the play until almost the end of it. There is still, of course, as there must be in any play for an audience of Boccaccio's countrymen, much of the bawdy side of love: but the object of exhibiting it is, nominally at all events, to expose it to the flick of satire, whilst in Roman comedy it enters more or less as a natural escapade of the admirable young spark. Moreover, Ariosto's last comedy, the Scolastica, not only ties its interest down to the love of its youths for its maidens; it even gives to that love something of the quality of romantic devotion. Without intention, and as yet, without much change in outward form, classical comedy is moving gradually to romantic comedy, and is taking to itself a situation and a temper which in due course will transform the type to the sort which characterises romantic comedy. The transition is not so clearly discernible in the work of the English comic dramatists of the sixteenth century. For one thing, classical comedy never fastened itself so securely on to our stage as it did in Italy: and when our Elizabethan comedy was being forged, our romantic temper was urgent and largely conscious of itself. Yet something of the transitional process may be seen in the plays of John Lyly: and its main stages stand out clear as signposts in the two plots which together make The Taming of a Shrew. But in the main, Elizabethan romantic comedy did not emerge through a process of natural evolution: it was the product of an obligation imposed ruthlessly on the dramatists by their own age. They were required to beat out a play which should be comic and romantic at once; and at first, they scarcely realised that the task involved almost insuperable difficulties. It seemed a
simple matter merely to lift the romances bodily on to the comic stage: the whole history of Elizabethan comedy is a tale of the reluctance of comedy to compromise itself with romance. Not realising his difficulties, Shakespeare sat down light-heartedly to write a romantic comedy, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Before he had finished, he had encountered and had blundered through unexpected obstacles.

To realise what they were and to appreciate the reluctance of romantic material to be naturalised on the comic stage will involve us in a closer examination of romantic taste and of its primary cause, the romances of the Middle Ages. Romantic taste will not tolerate any sort of love-story. Mediaeval romances are love-stories, and something besides. Not only are they stories of a particular kind of love; they also incorporate a larger tradition which moulds the quality of every element in their material. The range of their incidents, the temper of their sentiments, the pattern of their heroes, the atmosphere of their scenery, and the trend of their ideas, each and all contribute to the homogeneity of the tradition. And in the making of the tradition, life and literature had played complementary parts. The romances reflect the ideal of knighthood by their imaginative idealisation of the experience of knights.

What chivalry is in morals and feudalism in politics, so are the romances in literature. They are the artistic counterpart of the moral and political society which produced them. Socially, one thinks of the Middle Ages as a feudal edifice. Feudalism built itself on an ascending scale of suzerainities. Its elaborate distinctions of precedence created colleges of heralds and a code of social etiquette, as well as a Round Table compromise. But politically and socially speaking, such a system was fragile as a castle of cards, capable of destruction by mere exposure to the winds of heaven, unless cemented by the strongest of moral and sentimental ties. And the only moral tie which could hold the fabric erect was the sense of loyalty. So, out of mere political necessity in the first place, loyalty is the virtue above all other virtues in the mediaeval knight's equipment; to be false to a plighted oath is first in the catalogue of a recreant's sins. As in the life of the body politic, so in the communion of the Catholic Church. The representative of God on earth called for absolute obedience, and religion consecrated loyalty. Life's highest ideal was unswerving devotion to an all-exacting service, the quest of a holy grail. Inevit-
ably these public ideals were closely reflected in those phases of man's life which come most intimately to his hearth. His private and domestic existence was governed by a code of conduct in the same range of values. Like his worship of God and his faith to his suzerain was the love of his lady. It called for a dedicated life. And as it was the article of his faith which lay closest to his bosom, his love of woman tended to loom more largely in his consciousness than did the less peculiar elements of his creed. Love became the corner stone of the whole fabric of chivalry. The *chansons de gestes* passed into the romances of a Chretien de Troyes: and in them, the love of woman was the cause and not the consequence of devotion to God and to king.

But, theoretically, it was love more like Dante's for Beatrice than Petrarch's for Laura. The pattern knight was he whose days were solemnly devoted to unselfish service for his church, his country, or his love. He was vowed to absolute renunciation of all merely personal desire in the pursuit of his hazardous quest. The superhuman exaltation of the ideal transfigured every circumstance connected with it. The love of woman was a state of mystic adoration removed entirely from the attractions of the flesh. The worshipper was a Sir Galahad, a maiden knight to whom is given such hope he knows not fear, whose strength is as the strength of ten because his heart is pure. A love like this has become a ritual, and expresses itself in social behaviour with an elaborate etiquette of courtesy in word and deed. Medieval romance depicts an ideal world of which each element is occasioned by the ideal of chivalry. It is a world of prouesse and courtesie. Its heroes are without fear and without reproach. They are initiated in courtly forms of service in the lady's bower, until with manhood they lay their heart before the lady of their choice, and from thenceforward their lives are dedicated to proofs of their worthiness by facing unprecedented trials and overcoming incredible obstacles in the uttermost parts of the earth. That is why the medieval love-story is perforce a story of adventure. Its wooing follows elaborately prescribed formalities, and its quests penetrate strange remote regions.
where deeds of unexampled valour are called forth by the attacks of terrifying monsters more horrible than the eye of man has seen.

Turn, for instance, to the tale of Owein and Lunet. "Having," says Cynon, "conquered in all deeds of valour those who were in the same country as myself, I equipped me and travelled through the uttermost parts of the earth and its wilderesses." Amongst his adventures, he is told that he will meet "a large black man on the top of a tumulus, who is in no way smaller than two of the men of this world." When, in fact, he meets the man, even expectation is out-done: "I had been told he was huge; much larger was he than that; and his iron staff which it had been said to me was a burden for two men, it was clear to me was a burden for four warriors"—Falstaff's romancing about men in Lincoln green scarcely outdoes the original romances themselves. Of course there was variety in the haps of knight-errantry. Not always was it a black man who crossed one's path. Owein, at one point of his journey, finds himself in the presence of maidens sewing brocaded silk in golden chairs, and more marvellous by far was their fairness and beauty than what Owein had been told. At such a revelation, every true man "must burn with love until every part of him is filled." One is reminded of the solemn injunction laid on Peredur: "Should you see a fair woman, woo her, even if she desires you not; she will make you, for that reason, a better man and a more flourishing leader." These are examples from the Mabinogion, that is, from the body of romance before it had been fully romanticised. But for that very reason, they display even more clearly the elements which are indigenous to romance. In the full elaboration to which they were to grow, everything—incident, figure, atmosphere, and sentiment—shapes itself to play its part naturally in the whole substance. Comprehensively, these elements provide a universe in which the code of chivalry as a moral and as a social ideal can exemplify itself most significantly. No doubt in the historic origins of romance, the material adventures provide the main if not the entire interest: the chansons de gestes precede the romances. But the prevailing current of ideals infused itself slowly through the corporal matter, until the whole of it became the visible incorporation of the spirit and the temper of the mediæval world. And at the moment of its highest attainment, the soul of it
was indubitably its characteristic sense of the meaning of woman and of love.

In its first intention, Elizabethan romantic comedy was an attempt to adapt the world of romance and all its implications to the service of comedy. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* shows that intention at its crudest. In the story of it, there are all the main marks of the mediaeval tradition as that tradition had been modified, elaborated and extended by the idealism of Petrarch and by the speculations of the Platonists. It is yet the same tradition in its essence, corroborated rather than altered by the modifying factors; as, for instance, at the hands of Ficino, Platonism brought a medico-metaphysical theory to explain the love-laden gleam of a beautiful eye. Shakespeare's play embodies a literary manner and a moral code; its actions are conducted according to a conventional etiquette and are determined by a particular creed; and every feature of it, in matter and in sentiment, is traceable to the romantic attitude of man to woman. It presents as its setting a world constituted in such fashion that the obligations and the sanctions of its doctrines could best be realised. The course of the whole play is determined by the values such doctrine attaches to the love of man and woman.

A note struck early in the play recalls one of the few passionate love-stories of classical legend—"how young Leander crossed the Hellespont,"—and at another moment, Ariadne is remembered "passioning for Theseus' perjury." But the real colour of the tale is given unmistakably by the presence amongst its characters of Sir Eglamour. By his name is he known and whence he springs. He points straight back to the source of the religious cult of love: "servant and friend" of Sylvia, he is ready at call to rush to any service to which she may command him. His own lady and his true love died, and on her grave he vowed pure chastity, dedicating himself to the assistance of lovers in affliction, recking nothing what danger should betide him in the venture. His home is in the land of mediaeval romance; and his brethren are those consecrated warriors who will undertake all danger, though it stands next to death, for one calm look of Love's approval. He comes to life again in a play where knightly vows are spoken, where errantry is the normal mode of service, where the exercise of tilt and tournament is the traditional recreation, where lovers name themselves habitually the servants of their ladies, where
such service may impose as a duty the helping of one's lady to a rival, and where the terms of infamy to which the utmost slander can give voice are "perjured, false, disloyal." And that is the world in which Shakespeare makes his Two Gentlemen live.

Throughout the play, "Love's a mighty lord,"

There is no woe to his correction
Nor to his service no such joy on earth.

This is the state of the lover as the old *Romaunt of the Rose* had depicted it:

The sore of love is merveilous,
For now is the lover joyous,
Now can he pleyne, now can he grone,
Now can he syngen, now maken mone;
To day he pleyneth for hereynesse,
To morowe he pleyeth for jolyynesse.
The lyf of love is full contrarie,
Which stounde-mele can otte varie.

Heavy penance is visited on unbelievers

for contemning Love,
Whose high imperious thoughts will punish him
With bitter fasts, with penitential groans, 
With nightly tears and daily heart-sore sighs.

Sleep is chased from such a rebel's now enthralled eyes, to make them watchers of his own heart's sorrow. From true votaries, nothing less than absolute devotion is required. They must hold no discourse except it be of love. Absent from their lady, they must let no single hour o'erslip without its ceremonial sigh for her sake. The more such languishing fidelity appears to be spurned, the more must it growl and fawn upon its recalcitrant object. Apart from love, nothing in life has the least significance:

banished from her,
Is self from self, a deadly banishment.
What light is light, if Sylvia be not seen?
What joy is joy, if Sylvia be not by?
Except I be by Sylvia in the night,
There is no music in the nightingale.
Unless I look on Sylvia in the day,
There is no day for me to look upon.
She is my essence, and I leave to be,
If I am not by her fair influence
Fostered, illumined, cherished, kept alive.
Such is the consecrated desolation of the romantic lover: the mediaeval sense of a world emptied of its content persists through romantic poetry and is the undertone of the Renaissance sonneteers' woe. Bembo puts it not unlike Valentine in the play:

Tu m'hai lasciato senza sole i giorni,
Le notte senza stelle, e grave e egro
Tutto questo, ond'io parlo, ond'io repiro:
La terra scossa, e'l ciel turbato e negro;
Et pien di mille oltraggi e mille scorci
Me sembra ogni parte, quant'io miro.
Valor e cortesia si dipartiro
Nel tuo partire; e'l mondo infermo giacque;
Et virtu spense i suoi chiari lumi;
Et le fontane a i fiumi
Nega la venas antica e l'usate acque:
Et gli augelletti abandonaro il canto,
Et l'herbe e i fior lasciar nude le piaggie,
Ne più di fronde il bosco si consperse.

But the lover has ample recompense for his sorrow. Setting the world at nought, he gains a heaven in its stead:

she is mine own,
And I as rich in having such a jewel
As twenty seas if all their sand were pearl,
The water nectar, and the rocks pure gold.

Inevitably, a creed of such ardent devotion has its appropriate liturgy. Stuffed with protestation, and full of new-found oaths, the lover utters his fears in wailful sonnets, whose composed rhymes are fully fraught with serviceable vows:

... and on the altar of her beauty
You sacrifice your tears, your sighs, your heart:
Write till your ink be dry, and with your tears
Moist it again, and frame some feeling line
That may discover such integrity:
For Orpheus' lute was strung with poets' sinews,
Whose golden touch could soften steel and stones,
Make tigers tame, and huge leviathans
Forsake unsounded deeps to dance on sands.
After your dire-lamenting elegies,
Visit by night your lady's chamber window
With some sweet concert; to their instruments
Tune a deploring dump: the night's dead silence
Will well become such sweet-complaining grievance.
This, or else nothing, will inherit her.
With oceans of tears, and twenty thousand soul-confirming oaths, the lover excites himself to a fervid bacchanalian orgy, and in his braggardism proclaims his lady "sovereign to all the creatures on the earth," threatening destruction to all who will not at once subscribe, and extermination to any who but dare to breathe upon her. In the intervals of these ecstatic outbursts, the lover stands before the picture of his love, sighing and weeping, wreathing his arms like a malcontent, until at length he walks off alone like one that hath the pestilence.

When cruel circumstance separates him from his lady, etiquette prescribes the proper behaviour and the right demeanour. He resorts to the congenital solitude of woods or wildnesses. In the earlier days of the cult, his manner on these occasions was more violent than ceremonious. Tristan, as Malory tells us, exiled and separated from his love, goes mad for grief; he would unlace his armour and go into the wilderness, where he "brast down the trees and bowes, and otherwhyle, when he found the harp that the lady sent him, then wold he harpe and playe therupon and wepe togethre." But in the course of time the manners of solitaries became more polite. Chaucer (or the author of the *Romaunt of the Rose*) advises the lover to cultivate a proper solitude:

For ofte, whan thou bithenkist thee
Of thy lovyng, where so thou be,
Fro folk thou must departe in hie,
That noon perceyve thi maladie.
But hyde thyne harme thou must alone,
And go forthe sole, and make thy mone.

It is only one more stage to the final artistic decorum of the habit. The lover in the French romance *Flamenca* "in the dark of night goes of custom to listen to the nightingale in the wood." Just, in fact, as does Valentine: in the intervals between inspecting the arms or allocating the booty of his bandit-band, he takes his laments for Sylvia into the woods for orchestral effects from the nightingales:

These shadowy, desert, unfrequented woods
I better brook than flourishing peopled towns:
Here can I sit alone, unseen of any,
And to the nightingale's complaining notes
Tune my distresses and record my woes.

Such is the way of lovers in romances, and in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Their state of spiritual ecstasy is revealed by the pro-
gressive ætherialisation of their sustenance. A collection of the menus of romantic feasts is more than a gastronomic document. In the beginnings of romance, eating and drinking was a major occupation. Owein ate and drank “whilst it was late in the time of the nones”; and once he was bidden to a feast which took three months to consume and had taken three years to prepare. But later, the initiate have so far purged their mortal grossness, that eating and loving begin to appear incompatible. Again the Romaunt of the Rose brings the evidence:

Such comyng and such goyng
Such heavynesse and such wakyng
Makith lovers, withouten wene,
Under her clothes pale and lene.
For love leveth colour ne cleernesse,
Who loveth trewe hath no fatnesse;
Thou shalt wel by thynself seye
That thou must needes assaied be;
For men that shape hem other weye
Falsly her ladyes to bitraye,
It is no wonder though they be fatt,
With false othes her loves they gatt.
For oft I see suche losengours
Fatter than abbatis or priours.

On occasion, the true lover, like Jehan in Jehan and Blonde, is like to fade away, and can only eat when his lady serves the dishes to him with her own delicate hands. Our Valentine had been a good trencherman before he became a romantic lover; in those days, when he fasted, it was presently after dinner. But once he becomes a votary, not even ambrosia nor nectar are good enough for his æthereal table: “now can I break my fast, dine, sup, and sleep upon the very naked name of love.” How he thrives on this diet will become a primary article of the literary and dramatic criticism of The Two Gentlemen of Verona.

So much for the spirit of romance in the play. Now for the world in which it is set,—since, taking its religion thence, it must also take the romantic world in which such religion may reveal itself. Not men living dully sluggardised at home, but those bred and tutored in the wider world, seeking preferment out, trying their fortunes in war or discovering islands far away,—these are they who have scope to put such religion to the proof. So in the Two Gentlemen of Verona,
the scene is laid in Italy, the country which to Shakespeare's fellows was the hallowed land of romance. But it is an Italy of romance, not of physiographic authenticity. It has inland waterways unknown to geographers; the journey from Verona to Mantua is a sea-voyage; it is indeed a scenario in which all the material trappings of romance may be assembled. Mountain and forest are indispensable, mountains which are brigand-haunted, and forests in the gloom of which are abbeys from whose postern gates friars creep into the encircling woods, so wrapt in penitential mood that lurking lions, prowling hungrily for food, are utterly forgotten. In such a locality, the tale of true love may run its uneven course. The poetically gifted lover meets such obstacles as a rival, at whom he hurls his cartel, and a perverse father whose plans for his daughter are based on such irrelevant considerations as the rivals' bank-balances. The father's castle has its upper tower far from the ground, and built so shelving that to climb it is at apparent hazard of one's life. And here is the angelic daughter's chamber wherein she is nightly lodged, within doors securely locked, so that rescue can only be by a corded ladder to her chamber window. Then unexpected difficulties will be expected to intrude: the best-laid plot to carry her away is foiled by the machinations of a villain out of the least suspected quarter. Banishment naturally follows, and at length, with the flight of the heroine and the pursuit of her by the entire court, all will work out well by a series of surprising coincidences, to which rivals, brigands, friars, and lions are all somehow contributory. In this way, romantic love makes its romantic universe; and this in fact is the setting and the story of The Two Gentlemen of Verona.

This, both in matter and in spirit, is the tradition which the Elizabethan dramatists desired to lift bodily on to their comic stage. But something somehow went wrong. The spirit of medieval romance seemed to shrivel in the presence of comedy. Something similar had in fact happened in the real world outside the theatre. The last hero of romance had lived gloriously and had died quite out of his part. Jacques de Lalaing, le bon chevalier, the mirror of knighthood who adorned the Burgundian court in the middle of the fifteenth century, had become the pattern of chivalry for all Europe. To his contemporaries, "fair was he as Paris, pious as Æneas, wise as Ulysses, and passionate as Hector"); and his exploits in tournament and in knight-errantry had carried his fame through many lands. He
died an early death in 1453. But he did not die of a lover’s broken heart; nor was he slain in tourney by a foeman worthy of his steel and of his thirty-two emblazoned pennants. He was shot down by a cannon ball in an expedition against the merchants and shopkeepers of Ghent. The gross ponderable facts of a very material world swept the symbol of an outworn ideal from off the face of the earth. So in The Two Gentlemen, a sheer clod of earth, Launce by name, will, quite unwittingly, expose the unsubstantiality of the romantic hero with whom the play throws him into contact. But we are anticipating. The consequences of Shakespeare’s attempt to dramatise romance must be watched in closer detail.

There is little wonder that the Elizabethan dramatists saw the dramatic possibilities of such material, and did not at first perceive its dramatic disadvantages. They felt the dramatic thrill of following these lovers and setting the world at nought. Nor is it very difficult to set the geographical world at nought, at least to the extent of making inland seas in Italy or liberating living lions in its woods. Yet sometimes the distortions of the physical universe necessarily ventured by the romanticist entail violent wrenches of our common consciousness. The dukes of Shakespeare’s Italy, for instance, apparently have magic power over the flight of time; for whilst a banished man is speaking but ten lines, the proclamation of his banishment is ratified, promulgated, and has become publicly known throughout the duchy, and sentinels have already been posted along the frontiers to prevent a surreptitious return of the exile to the land which he has not yet had time to pack his suit-case for leaving. It is a land too where optical illusions, or perhaps optical delusions, are the normal way of vision. A man seeking a page-boy interviews an applicant for the post; he is just enough of a business man to know that some sort of reason must be advanced for taking on a servant who can show neither character nor reference from previous employers, and so Proteus, engaging the disguised Julia, says that the engagement is specifically on the recommendation of the applicant’s face; but he does not recognise, as he gazes into this face, that it was the one he was smothering with kisses a few weeks before when its owner, in her proper dress, was his betrothed. Yet these are really only minor impediments, requiring but a little and a by no means reluctant suspension of our disbelief. They are altogether insignificant compared with the reservations involved when romance
displays its peculiar propensity for setting the world of man at nought. To satisfy its own obligations, it perforce demanded super-men; at all events, the heroes it puts forward as its votaries in the play are something either more or less than men.

Romantically speaking, Valentine is the hero, and not alone in the technical sense. In classical comedy the hero is simply the protagonist, the central figure who is the biggest butt of the comic satire. But here the protagonist is the upholder of the faith on which the play is built, the man with whom the audience is called upon to rejoice admiringly, and not the fellow at whom it is derisively to laugh. He is to play the hero in every sense of the word. Yet in the event, the prevailing spirit of romance endows him with sentiments and provides him with occupations which inevitably frustrate the heroic intention. The story renders him a fool. Convention may sanctify his sudden conversion from the mocker to the votary of love, and may even excuse or palliate his fractious braggardism when he insults Proteus with ill-mannered comparisons between Silvia and Julia. But his helplessness and his impenetrable stupidity amount to more than the traditional blindness of a lover. Even the clown Speed can see through Silvia's trick, when she makes Valentine write a letter to himself. But Valentine plays out the excellent motion as an exceeding puppet, unenlightened by the faintest gleam of common insight. And despite his vaunt that he knows Proteus as well as he knows himself, he is blind to villainies so palpable, that Launce, the other clown of the piece, though he be but a fool, has the wits to recognise them for what they plainly are. The incidents are dramatically very significant, for both Launce and Speed come into the play for no reason whatever but to be unmistakable dolts. One begins to feel that it will be extremely difficult to make a hero of a man who is proved to be duller of wit than the patent idiots of the piece. Even when Valentine might have shone by resource in action, he relapses into conventional laments, and throws himself helplessly into the arms of Proteus for advice and consolation. Heroic opportunity stands begging round him when he encounters the brigands. But besides demonstrating that he can tell a lie—witness his tale of cock and bull about having killed a man—the situation only serves to discredit him still more: for the words of his lie, his crocodile tears for the fictitious man he claims to have slain, and his groundless boast that he slew him manfully in fight without false vantage or base
treachery, are in fact nothing but an attempt to make moral capital by means of forgery and perjury. They have not even the recommendation of the Major-General’s tears for the orphan boy. When at length Valentine is duly installed as captain of the brigands, his chief occupation is to vary highway robbery with sentimental descants on the beauty of nature in her “shadowy, desert, unfrequented woods”:

Here can I sit alone, unseen of any—

and we already know his favourite hobby on these saunterings—

And to the nightingale’s complaining notes
Tune my distresses and recording woes.

He is own brother to Gilbert’s coster, who, when he isn’t jumping on his mother, loves to lie abasking in the sun, and to the cut-throat, who, when not occupied in crimes, loves to hear the little brook agurgling and listen to the merry village chimes. But Valentine’s utmost reach of ineptitude comes with what, again romantically speaking, is meant to be the heroic climax of the play. When he has just learnt the full tale of the villainy of Proteus, the code permits him neither resentment nor passion. Like a cashier addressing a charwoman who has pillered a penny stamp, he sums up his rebuke—“I am sorry I must never trust thee more.” And worse follows immediately. With but five lines of formal apology from the villain, Valentine professes himself so completely satisfied that he enthusiastically resigns his darling Silvia to the traitor. Even Valentine must have seen that the gesture was a little odd, because he quotes the legal sanction. It is the code, a primary article in the romantic faith—“that my love may appear plain and free.” But it makes a man a nincompoop. Nor does it help much that after this preposterous episode, Valentine is allowed to spit a little fire in an encounter with another rival, Thurio. He has already proved himself so true a son of romance that he can never again be mistaken for a creature of human nature.

Proteus is less hampered by romantic obligation; because the plot requires him to have just sufficient of salutary villainy to make him throw over their commandments for his own ends. Yet the villain of romance suffers almost as much from the pressure of romanticism as does the hero. The noble fellows whom he, as villain, is called upon to deceive are such gullible mortals that little positive skill is necessary. Proteus can fool Thurio and Valentine and the Duke without exerting
himself. But on the one occasion when he might have shown his wits, he only reveals his lack of them. Making love to Silvia, he meets her protest against his disloyalty to Julia by inventing the easy excuse that Julia is dead. Silvia replies that, even so, he should be ashamed to wrong Valentine. It is, of course, a tight corner: but the best Proteus can do is to say "I likewise hear that Valentine is dead." He might at least have displayed a little more ingenuity in invention; he fails in precisely such a situation as would have permitted the clown of classical comedy to triumph. Moreover, the main plot requires Proteus to be guilty of incredible duplicity, and of the most facile rapidity in changing morals and mistresses. But he need scarcely have made the change explicit in words so ineptly casual and banal as his remark: "Methinks my zeal to Valentine is cold." The phrase is accidentally in keeping with the unintended complacence he displays when, wooing the lady who will have none of him, he begins by informing her that "he has made her happy" by his coming. The trait becomes intolerably ludicrous when, all his sins forgiven him, and Julia restored to his arms, all he can utter in confession is his own fatuous self-conceit:

O heaven, were man
But constant, he were perfect.

It is, of course, a fine sentiment; but the audience, having seen Valentine, simply will not believe it.

Even the brigands of romance will scarcely stand the test of the stage. They enter with metaphorical daggers in mouths bristling with black mustachios and with desperate oaths. Callous and bloodthirsty ruffians, spoiling for a fight, their chief regret is that fate is sending only one defenceless traveller to be rifled instead of ten. But when the destined victim turns out to be two, courage perhaps abates a little: at all events, the travellers are warned to keep their distance, and throw over the booty or otherwise to assume a sitting posture, whilst the rifling is safely done by the desperadoes themselves. Perhaps this, and not his customary ineptitude in speech, is what makes Valentine address the villains as "My friends." But, of course, his assumption is, for the trade of brigandage, economically unsound. And so, with apologies for correcting him, Valentine is informed that he is not playing the game—"that's not so, sir; we are your enemies." But the outlaws are connoisseurs of masculine beauty, and Valentine's fine
figure secures him an opportunity for a hearing: one cannot but note that this is the first time that any of his romantic attributes has made for his advantage, and that he misuses it scandalously for his lying brag. Hearing the fiction, however, the bandits feel at once that here is a fellow spirit, given, like themselves, to "so small a fault" as homicide. Straightway they implore him to show them his diploma in the modern languages, promising him the kingship of the band if it is of good honours' standard. Becoming convivial, they reveal their amiable dispositions in snatches of their life-history. One has amused himself with attempts at abduction. Another, when the whim takes him, "in his mood," has the merry trick of stabbing gentlemen unto the heart; and his gaiety makes us forget that a mood in Shakespeare's English was not quite the casual fancy it now is. Another acclaims these and other "such like petty crimes" as congenial peccadilloes in his own repertory. By this time, the brigands have become so hilarious with their reminiscences, that they are no longer minded to scrutinise Valentine's academic credentials. They will take him for a linguist merely "on his own report," and, mainly because he "is beautified with goodly shape," they offer him the leadership, pathetically promising to love him as their commander and their king. Clearly such a thoroughly unbrigandlike procedure as this election has almost put them out of their parts. They must be allowed to recover in a traditional tableau. Daggers are whipped out, threats become fierce, and Valentine, with steel points at his throat, is given the choice of being a king or a corpse. Perhaps his fear is responsible for the odd proviso that "silly women" shall be exempt from the depredations of the gang over which he is to rule; but it is of course too much to expect of better men than Valentine to require them to anticipate a variation in the meaning of a word. Neither before nor after the Two Gentlemen of Verona has dramatic literature known a band of outlaws like to these—except once: there are the Pirates of Penzance: but then Gilbert meant his to be funny.

One begins to suspect that everything which is hallowed by the tradition of romance is made thereby of no avail for the purposes of drama. But there are Julia and Launce to reckon with; and these are figures universally accounted the most substantial beings in the play. So indeed they are. But they owe it entirely to the fact that they are under no obligation whatever to the code of romance.
behaviour of Valentine is entirely conditioned by the doctrine of romantic love. But the code allowed to woman no duty but to excite by her beauty the devoted worship of her knight. If England instead of France had performed the final codification of chivalry, its women might have had other and less lady-like propensities, such, for instance, as King Horn’s Rimenhild displayed. But when a French romance elaborates its portrait of womanhood, it gives her patience rather than character: women with the forcefulness of a distinct personality might have turned the energies of their knights away from consecrated paths of knighthood, as Chretien’s Enide turned her Erec:

Mes tant l’ama Erec d’amors
Que d’armes mes ne li chaloit,
Ne a tornoiemant n’aloit
N’avoit mes soing de tornoiier.

Wherefore Chretien’s romance tells of Erec’s regeneration through the discipline by which he reduces his Enide to absolute submission. At the end, she has attained complete self-suppression—

Ne je tant hardie ne sui
Que je os regarder vers lui—

and, to the modern eye, has become the perfect pattern of an exquisitely charming nonentity.

When Shakespeare takes over a tradition whose women are like these, so long as he preserves the beauty of their faces, he can endow them with whatever character he may please. His Julia is a creation, not a convention. As she is a woman, acting on a woman’s instinct—“I have no other but a woman’s reason, I think him so because I think him so”—she is depicted in moods, whimsies, and vagaries which are in fact the stuff of dramatic characterisation. Like the heroine of romance, she will cover her first love-letter with kisses, and press the precious manuscript to her heart. But like the spirited independent young lady of the world, she will not expose herself to the chuckles of her maid by exhibiting the common symptoms of her affections. Hence the pretended contempt, and the struggle to keep up appearances, even at considerable risk to the sacred document. But for what seriously concerns her love, Julia is too level-headed to over-reach herself. As far as may be, she will avoid the disapproval of opinion: but where there is no remedy, she will defy a scandalised world, and undertake her pilgrimage of love. She knows the hazards
of the road and the many weary steps it will involve. But she also knows her own capacities, and has duly taken note of all material things she will stand in need of. And although Proteus is a poor thing on whom to lavish so much love, Julia knows that love is indeed a blinded god; and in her capable hands even a Proteus may be moulded to something worth the having.

Launce is another who insists on remaining in the memory. He has no real right within the play, except that gentlemen must have servants, and Elizabethan audiences must have clowns. But coming in thus by a back-door, he earns an unexpected importance in the play. Seen side by side with Speed, his origin is clear. Whilst Speed belongs to the purely theatrical family of the Dromios, with their punning and logic-chopping asinities, Launce harks back to the native Costard. And as Costard shows his relationship to Bottom by his skill in village theatricals, so Launce reveals by his wooing his family connection with Touchstone, and Touchstone's Audrey, who was a poor thing, but his own. All the kind of the Launces are thus palpably a mighty stock. Their worth, compared with that of the Speeds and the Dromios, is admirably indicated by Launce's consummate use of Speed's curiosity and of his better schooling. Launce gets his letter deciphered; he gets also an opportunity to display his own superior breeding, and to secure condign punishment for the ill-mannered Speed: "now will he be swinged for reading my letter; an unmannerly slave, that will thrust himself into secrets! I'll after, to rejoice in the boy's correction."

Launce is happiest with his dog. Clownage can go no farther than the pantomimic representation, with staff and shoe and dog, of the parting from his home-folks. Laughter is hilarious at Launce's bitter grief that his ungrateful cur declined to shed a tear. That Launce should expect it is, of course, the element of preposterous incongruity which makes him a clown. But when he puts his complaint squarely, that his "dog has no more pity in him than a dog," the thrust pierces more than it was meant to. Romance itself has expected no less largely of Valentine, of Proteus, and of the rest. It has demanded that man shall be more than man, and has laid upon him requisitions passing the ability of man to fulfil. At the bidding of romance, Valentine and Proteus have become what they are in the play, and the one thing they are not is men like other men. A further incident in which Launce is concerned takes on a similarly unexpected
significance. He has made as great a sacrifice as did Valentine himself: he has given up his own cur in place of the one which Proteus entrusted to him to take to Silvia. But the effect hardly suggests that self-sacrifice is worldly-wise. And so once more it seems to bring into question the worldly worth of the code which sanctifies such deeds. Unintentionally, Launce has become the means by which the incompatibilities and the unrealities of romantic postulates are laid bare. And Launce is palpably the stuff of comedy: awakening our comic sense, he inevitably sharpens our appreciation of the particular range of incongruities which are the province of comedy—the incongruity between what a thing really is and what it is taken to be.

Romance, and not comedy, has called the tune of The Two Gentlemen of Verona, and governed the direction of the action of the play. That is why its creatures bear so little resemblance to men of flesh and blood. Lacking this, they are scarcely dramatic figures at all; for every form of drama would appear to seek at least so much of human nature in its characters. But perhaps the characters of the Two Gentlemen are comic in a sense which at first had never entered the mind of their maker. Valentine bids for the sympathy, but not for the laughter of the audience: the ideals by which he lives are assumed to have the world's approbation. But in execution they involve him in most ridiculous plight. He turns the world from its compassionate approval to a mood of sceptical questioning. The hero of romantic comedy appears no better than its clowns. And so topsyturvy is the world of romance that apparently the one obvious way to be reputed in it for a fool, is to show at least a faint sign of discretion and of common sense. Thurio, for instance, was cast for the dotard of the play, and of course he is not without egregious folly. But what was meant in the end to annihilate him with contempt, turns out quite otherwise. Threatened by Valentine's sword, he resigns all claim to Silvia, on the ground that he holds him but a fool that will endanger his body for a girl that loves him not. The audience is invited to call Thurio a fool for thus showing himself to be the one person in the play with a modicum of worldly wisdom, a respect for the limitations of human nature, and a recognition of the conditions under which it may survive. Clearly, Shakespeare's first attempt to make romantic comedy had only succeeded so far that it had unexpectedly and inadvertently made romance comic. The real problem was still to be faced.