Don’t Kiss the Messenger: Wooing by Proxy in Shakespeare

by David P. Gontar (October 2014)

“I can live no longer by thinking.” – Orlando

It is a commonplace that love is a paradox. Drawing us together, it is yet a third element beyond its terms, that is, an intrusion. It is in virtue of this ambiguity that it is rarely the solution we would have so much as the challenge to which we must rise. (Bradley, 21) Imperceptibly, our amorous dealings become relationships, things to which we ourselves stand in subsidiary attitudes often at odds with one another. That is perhaps why desire has so often been personified as a capricious *Eros*, himself quite capable of falling in love, as he does with Psyche in the old myth. He may be coveted – or resisted. Tradition has it that Cupid goes armed, and his victims experience pain and anguish rather than the popularly advertised felicity. He is a *tertium quid* insinuating himself between individuals and driving them asunder even in the very moment of conjunction. Think of the nurse and Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet* or Panadrus in *Troilus and Cressida*. It is not love’s blessings dramatized there so much as its proliferating complications. As Sartre says with maximum economy, “love is the desire to be loved,” as such, essentially dialectical and unstable. In its intermediary role it may be hypostatized as an arrow, harbinger of desire. Shakespeare frequently illustrates the problematic of love by focusing on proxy wooing. *King Henry VI, Much Ado about Nothing, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, all suggest that *Eros* has his own agenda, and willy nilly, whether we kick against the pricks or submit to his will, there is always a price to be paid.

1. William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk in *King Henry VI*

Arguably the earliest wooing by proxy in Shakespeare occurs in *King Henry VI, Part Two*. The agent is William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, deputized by young King Henry VI to go to France to win for him the hand of Lady Margaret of Anjou, daughter of René, Duke of Anjou and King of Naples and Jerusalem. We discover in Part One, however, that Suffolk has other plans.

> Thus Suffolk hath prevailed, and thus he goes
> As did the youthful Paris once to Greece,

With hope to find the like event in love,
But prosper better than the Trojan did.
Margaret shall now be queen and rule the King;
But I will rule both her, the King, and realm.
(V, vii, 103-108)

How shall this be accomplished? By love, of course. Henry will wed Margaret by proxy, to be sure, but the relator will contrive to become beloved of the king's bride, making him not a mere bearer of royal affections but an attractive object in his own right, in fact, an impediment standing between his liege and his Queen. To put it bluntly, he will seduce her. And so he does, to the detriment of a hapless monarch still under the thumb of the Lord Protector. When poor Henry welcomes his new wife it is likely he hasn't even got a clear conception of the "facts of life," much less his deputy's scheme to control England through Margaret.

Marriage by proxy was not an unheard of way to tie the matrimonial knot in Albion at this point in history (1445 A.D.), particularly amongst the nobility. Half a century later Prince Arthur would wed Katherine of Aragon in the same fashion. But as conventional a form of merger as it might have been, it was an open door to misuse and misunderstanding, as we will see.

SUFFOLK (kneeling before King Henry)

As by your high imperial majesty
I had in charge at my depart in France,
As Procurator to your excellence.
To marry Princess Margaret for your grace,

So, in the famous ancient city of Tours,

In presence of the kings of France and Sicil,

The Dukes of Orléans, Calaber, Bretagne, and Alen?on,

Seven earls, twelve barons, and twenty reverend bishops,

I have performed my task and was espoused,

And humbly now upon bended my bended knee,

In sight of England and her lordly peers,

Deliver up my title in the Queen

To your most gracious hands, that are the substance

Of that great shadow I did represent –

The happiest gift that ever marquis gave,

The fairest queen that ever king received.

(*King Henry VI*, Part Two, I, i, 1-16)

Under the practice of marriage by proxy, then, the procedure was not complete until "title" acquired by the agent in foreign ceremony was formally and publicly rendered up to his principal, in this case, King Henry VI. It was a delicate ambassadorial mission in which the diplomat would confer with the young lady's father and his courtiers, devise terms and sign documents. Presumably at some point there would have been personal conferences with the bride-to-be in which she would be made acquainted with her future husband by way of portraiture and the conveyance of appropriate sentiments. If consent was achieved, a full nuptial mass would follow, with the agent standing in place of the actual suitor. At that point he would be fully married to the bride, with the understanding that he would transport her to his principal untouched, transferring all right to her posthaste.

Readers of Shakespeare's *King Henry VI* know, of course, that there was an irregularity in the case of Margaret of Anjou. Somewhere along the way, Suffolk effectively alienated her affections.

QUEEN MARGARET

I tell thee, Pole, when in the city Tours
Thou rann'st a-tilt in honour of my love
And stol'st away the ladies' hearts of France,
I thought King Henry had resembled thee
In courage, courtship, and proportion.
But all his mind is bent to holiness,
To number Ave-Maries on his beads.
His champions are the prophets and apostles,
His weapons holy saws of sacred writ,
His study is his tilt-yard, and his loves
Are brazen images of canoniz?d saints.

I would the college of the cardinals
Would choose him Pope, and carry him to Rome,
And set the triple crown upon his head –
That were a state fit for his holiness.
(I, iii, 3-67)

It would seem that Suffolk put on quite a show in France, giving Lady Margaret the firm impression that his Lord was cut from the same cloth as himself in all manly qualities. Obviously she was disappointed. The text strongly implies that shortly after her arrival in England she and de la Pole engaged in a torrid romance, one in which the sanctimonious King Henry starred as the willing cuckold. (Part Two, IV, vii, 20-23) Instead of requiting the love of the weak monarch who wooed her via the advances of a go-between, Margaret is captivated by the forward messenger. The principal is either reviled or barely tolerated. Such is the risk of wooing by proxy.

In appraising the consequences of this mésalliance, we must consider the nature of Shakespeare's history plays, which served as retorts from which emerged the distillates of tragedy and comedy. For example, King Richard II is plainly a tragic figure, as his play's title implies, whereas the brash and jocular Richard III tends to be received as a comedian. The entire line running from *King Henry IV* Part One through *King Henry V* is primarily comical. What then, of Shakespeare's longest play, the massive triptych *King Henry VI*? It is respectfully submitted that here we witness the emergence of tragedy from the very bowels of comedy. Part One, for example, which contains the shrewish Joan of Arc, the jocular incident involving the capture of Lord Talbot by the Countess of Auvergne and the "miracle" at St. Albans, is largely comic in form and function. But as the Wars of the Roses unfold and reach a bitter crescendo in Part Three, where, for example, Queen Margaret hunts down Richard and sets a paper crown on his head (I, iv, 95), we sense the seriousness of this narrative and recognize that the action has taken a distinctly tragic turn. Where does this leave Part Two? After Suffolk has assassinated the Lord Protector, the good Duke Humphrey, he is condemned and exiled by a distraught King Henry. This, of course signals the end of the Margaret/Suffolk love affair. Their wrenching separation (III, ii, 304-417), which seems to look back to the heart-rending farewell of Richard II and his wife (Act 4, Sc. 1), is soon drained of its tragic significance. The banished Duke of Suffolk is seized by pirates in Act 4, Sc. 1, and his pseudo-heroic posturing in their hands falls flat.

SUFFOLK

Obscure and lousy swain, King Henry's blood,

The honorable blood of Lancaster,
Must not be shed by such a jady groom.
Hast thou not kissed thy hand and held my stirrup?
Bare-headed plodded by my foot-cloth mule
And thought thee happy when I shook my head?
How often hast thou waited at my cup,
Fed from my trencher, kneeled down at the board
When I have feasted with Queen Margaret?
Remember it, and let it make thee crestfall'n,
Ay, and allay this thy abortive pride,
How in our voiding lobby hast thou stood
And duly waited for my coming forth?
This hand of mine hath writ in thy behalf,
And therefore shall it charm thy riotous tongue.
(Part Two, IV, I, 51-65)

This sort of pompous palaver might have served in court, but on the deck of a pirate vessel on which all hands are sharpening their blades it is myopic and silly. Even these ruffians are fully aware of Suffolk's murder of the beloved Duke Humphrey. (IV, I, 72-103) Suffolk's high-sounding rhetoric is hollow and evokes laughter.

SUFFOLK

Suffolk's imperial tongue is stern and rough,
Used to command, untaught to plead for favour.
Far be it we should honour such as these
With humble suit. No, rather let my head
Stoop to the block than these knees bow to any
Save to the God of heaven and to my king;
And sooner dance upon a bloody pole
Than stand uncovered to the vulgar groom.
True nobility is exempt from fear;
More can I bear than you dare execute.

CAPTAIN

Hale him away, and let him talk no more.

SUFFOLK

Come, ‘soldiers’, show what cruelty ye can,
That this my death may never be forgot.
Great men oft die by vile Besonians;
A Roman sworder and banditto slave
Murdered sweet Tully; Brutus’ bastard hand
Stabbed Julius Caesar; savage islanders
Pompey the Great; and Suffolk dies by pirates.
(IV, I, 123-140)

The last three words are often put by stage directors in the ironic mouth of the pirate captain. Suffolk is clearly hysterical as he is hauled off to the block. Any shred of dignity he might have salvaged is lost in this condescending tirade. He is revealed as supercilious and comical in his defiance. His severed head is brought onstage five lines later, and promptly delivered to Queen Margaret. (IV, i, 144-146)

We topple thence to the very bottom of bathos in Act 4, Sc. 4 when Queen Margaret appears onstage “carrying Suffolk’s head.”

QUEEN MARGARET

Oft have I heard that grief softens the mind,
And makes it fearful and degenerate;
Think, therefore, on revenge, and cease to weep.
But who can cease to weep and look on this?
Here may his head lie on my throbbing breast,
But where’s the body that I should embrace?
(IV, iv, 1-7)

Soft indeed must be the mind that yields such utterances. For who could view this and keep from smiling tolerantly? Unless Suffolk’s head were delivered to Margaret *Federal Express* it must be a putrefying, maggot-ridden burden she clutches to her bosom. The image is so grotesque that most directors would be sorely tempted to cut it. Margaret’s own words should come back to haunt her now: “Is this the fashions in the court of England?” (Part Two, I, iii, 46) Her bizarre cry, “But where’s the body I should embrace?” composed at the outset of Shakespeare’s career, will reappear at its finale in *Cymbeline* in the wail of Fidele (Imogen), who awakens from her drug-induced stupor to find herself immured beside the headless trunk of Cloten.

IMOGEN

A headless man? The garments of Posthumous?
I know the shape of's leg; this is his hand,
His foot Mercurial, his Martial thigh,
The brawns of Hercules; but his Jovial face –
Murder in heaven! How? 'Tis gone.

* * *

Where is thy head? Where's that? Ay me, where's
That?
(IV, ii, 308-314; 323-324)

The passage from *Cymbeline* is another Shakespearean jab at love: Two persons could not be as different as Posthumous and Cloten, and Imogen is the former's wife. Yet she cannot distinguish her own husband's legs, hands and feet from those of the imbecile Cloten whose suit she has so often rejected. Imogen addresses the corpse she believes is Posthumous's remains, as stage instructions in *Henry VI* indicate that Margaret's words are directed "to Suffolk's head." (*Part Two*, IV, iv, 13) Both women seem demented in their raving to absent lovers: Suffolk sleeps with the fishes, while Posthumous Leonatus is fighting in battle, the name of saintly Imogen on his trembling lips. (*Cymbeline*, Act 5, Sc. 1)

Let it be remembered that marriage is the culmination of classical comedy. And of all marriages, none, not even that of Petruchio and his mate Kate, is more risible than that of poor Henry and his Queen of Hearts, Margaret of Anjou. Not only were these two utterly incommensurable, with Henry quivering beneath her basilisk gaze, their very inception as a couple was flawed by malicious proxy, allowing the Procurator to appropriate Henry's beauteous termagant. The tale has all the charm of a *Così fan tutte* or *Le nozze di Figaro*, and is made even more exquisite by its patina of facticity.

2. Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon in *Much Ado About Nothing*

Much Ado About Nothing is noteworthy in this context because the proxy is a disguised male, Don Pedro of Aragon. In the remaining three plays the proxies are all transvestite ladies (Julia, Viola and Rosalind). Those familiar with the text will be intrigued by the explanation of Taylor & Wells that "The action is set in Sicily, where Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, has recently defeated his brother, the bastard Don John, in a military engagement. Apparently reconciled, they return to the capital, Messina, as guests of the Governor, Leonato." (Taylor & Wells, 569) Marjorie Garber reports, on the other hand, that "The ranking officer of the group, Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, has a bastard brother, Don John, from whom he has been

estranged for reasons the play never specifies, and with whom he has just been reconciled.” (Garber, 372) Apparently, in the view of Taylor and Wells there wasn’t a good deal of recreation in old Sicily, and the local militia would fight internecine wars occasionally against close relatives to stave off ennui, getting together afterwards for wine and cheese. At any rate, amongst the junior officers hosted by Leonato in this piquant romantic comedy is Claudio, enamored of Leonato’s daughter, Hero. A mere girl when the squadron galloped to the front, she blossoms on its return. So enraptured is Claudio that, even without so much as a conversation, he contemplates matrimony, much to the horror of his cynical compatriots. The problem is, how to explain this sudden burst of connubial zeal to Leonato without giving the wrong impression. What is needed is a dose of avuncular gravitas. Enter Don Pedro.

DON PEDRO

Dost thou affect her, Claudio?

CLAUDIO

O my lord,
When you went onward on this ended action
I looked upon her with a soldier’s eye,
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand,
Than drive liking to the name of love.
But now I am returned, and that war-thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying I liked her ere I went to wars.

DON PEDRO

Thou wilt be like a lover presently,
And tire the hearer with a book of words.
If thou dost love fair Hero, cherish it,
And I will break with her, and with her father,
And thou shalt have her. Was’t not to this end
That thou began’st to twist so fine a story?

CLAUDIO

How sweetly you do minister to love,
That know love’s grief by his complexion!
But lest my liking might too sudden seem
I would have salved it with a longer treatise.

DON PEDRO

What need the bridge much broader then the flood?
The fairest grant is the necessity.
Look what will serve is fit. ‘Tis once: thou lovest,
And I will fit thee with the remedy.
I know we shall have revelling tonight.
I will assume thy part in some disguise,
And tell fair Hero I am Claudio.
And in her bosom I’ll unclasp my heart
And take her hearing prisoner with the force
And strong encounter of my amorous tale.
Then after to her father will I break,
And the conclusion is, she shall be thine.
In practice let us put it presently.
(I, i, 279-311)

Now it is evening. Onstage are Leonato, Antonio, his brother, Hero and Beatrice. Masked revelers enter the place of dance, including Don Pedro, Claudio and Don John.

DON PEDRO (*to Hero*)

Lady, will you walk about with your friend?

HERO

So you walk softly, and look sweetly, and say
Nothing, I am yours for the walk; and especially when
I walk away.

DON PEDRO

With me in your company?

HERO

I may say so when I please.

DON PEDRO

And when please you to say so?

HERO

When I like your favour; for God defend the lute
Should be like the case.

DON PEDRO

My visor is Philemon’s roof. Within the house is Jove.

HERO

Why, then, your visor should be thatched.

DON PEDRO

Speak low if you speak love.
(II, I, 79-90)

(They move aside)

This is the proxy moment but it is veiled. Will Don Pedro “aggravate” his voice and plead as Claudio? To do so he must identify himself as Claudio, yet in this passage he does not, raising a sliver of doubt as to his intentions. Is it plausible he should identify himself later, after the chat is already underway? Might he admit he is Don Pedro and then woo on behalf of Claudio? Again, we do not know. In this manner Shakespeare draws attention to the vexing nature of wooing by proxy, where nearly everything can go wrong. Certainly the classical allusion to the Greek myth of Philemon and Baucis is a positive sign. They were a poor couple who gave hospitality to two of the gods in mortal form when others in their village turned these strangers away. The implication is that Hero will not be propositioned in the vulgar sense; the message is honorable and likely a proposal of marriage – but from whom?

At this delicate juncture, Claudio is espied by the malevolent Don John and his confederate Borachio. They whisper in his ear that Don Pedro is madly in love with Hero, entailing that any proposal will be made his own right. (II, I, 150-161) Claudio’s fantasy comes crashing down about him as he soliloquizes:

CLAUDIO

Thus answer I in the name of Benedick,
But hear these ill news with the ears of Claudio.
‘Tis certain so, the Prince woos for himself.
Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and the affairs of love.
Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
Let every eye negotiate for itself,
And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.
This is an accident of hourly proof,
Which I mistrusted not. Farewell, therefore, Hero.
(II, I, 162-172)

Thus it is that Claudio comes to believe that Don Pedro played the rogue in much the same way we saw Duke Suffolk do in the ancient city of Tours with Lady Margaret: though proxy for another, he wins her affections for himself. Notice too how credulous Claudio is, and that he attributes fault to Hero herself on account of her beauty, which gives her the powers of “a witch.” Benedick, the bantering and misogynistic bachelor, has taught Claudio to distrust women and the institution of matrimony, and this corrosive spirit of doubt works to undermine Claudio’s nascent idealism. Although the villain in Don John’s scenario would be Don Pedro, falsely pledging to win Hero for Claudio, Claudio himself seems to almost blame Hero for succumbing to the blandishments of Don Pedro. Insofar as Hero might respond favorably to Don Pedro’s wooing for himself, in Claudio’s eyes she would be tainted, regardless of the fact that she would be entirely unaware of Claudio’s love and Don Pedro’s promise to woo on Claudio’s behalf. Thus, when Claudio soon thereafter is apprised of the favorable truth, that Hero has been won for himself, his joy is muted.

DON PEDRO

I’faith, lady, I think your blazon to be true,
Though I’ll be sworn, if he be so, is conceit is false.
Here, Claudio, I have wooed in thy name, and fair
Hero is won. I have broke with her father and his good
will obtained. Name the day of marriage, and God give
thee joy.

LEONATO

Count, take of me my daughter, and with her
My fortunes. His grace hath made the match, and all
Grace say amen to that.
(II, I, 277-285)

Here is the proof. Don Pedro is an honest proxy, and has wooed as Claudio himself. Leonato guarantees the match. What could be more reassuring? Yet Claudio temporizes.

BEATRICE

Speak count, 'tis your cue.

CLAUDIO

Silence is the perfectest herald of joy. I were but
Little happy if I could say how much. (*To Hero*) Lady,
As you are mine, I am yours. I give away myself for
You, and dote upon the exchange.

BEATRICE (*To Hero*)

Speak, cousin. Or, if you cannot, stop
His mouth with a kiss, and let him not speak, neither.
(II, I, 286-292)

Something is wrong here. Why must the groom need to be reminded to speak? When they come, Claudio's words are cold and reserved. There are times when silence is not golden and this is one of them. He seems to be almost pouting, as if he felt trapped. A mundane word like "exchange" feels out of place in a moment that should be excitement and pure bliss. The reason is plain: up to this very instant Claudio has been convinced that Hero has accepted the professed love of Don Pedro, leading him to dig in his heels against her. He is being asked now to perform an instant *volte-face* and hasn't the maturity or emotional agility to bring it off. His attitude remains one of distrust. Hero is therefore rightly puzzled. The man she sees before her bears no resemblance to the dashing costumed fellow who spoke to her so wittily and enchantingly last evening. Could that be a frown on his brow? In some versions, such as the Kenneth Branaugh production, Hero (Kate Beckinsale) does kiss Claudio (Keanu Reeves), but the risk is that such a kiss papers over a failure in the venture of proxy wooing. At this point the course of true love is not running smoothly. Yet in the spirit of *carpe diem*, Claudio

declares the next day his wedding day. (II, i, 334-335)

A sensible thing to do to clear the air would be to question Don John. He gave palpably false information about the intentions of Don Pedro respecting Hero. (II, I, 153-160) If Leonato declares publicly that he is giving his daughter in marriage to Claudio (as he does), Don Pedro couldn't have pleaded for himself but only for Claudio. And if that is true, Don John is a manifest liar. Furthermore, the motive is plain, as it is common knowledge that Don John bears a grudge against his brother. Yet no one thinks to investigate and hold Don John accountable for bearing false witness or defamation.

On the contrary, Don John still has sufficient credit to try again. In Act 3, Sc. 3, he approaches Don Pedro and Claudio to inform them that Hero is actively unfaithful.

DON JOHN

I came hither to tell you . . . the lady is disloyal.

CLAUDIO

Who, Hero?

DON JOHN

Even she. Leonato's Hero, every man's Hero.

CLAUDIO

Disloyal?

DON JOHN

The word is too good to paint out her
wickedness. I could say she were worse. Think you of
a worse title, and I will fit her to it. Wonder not till
further warrant. Go but with me tonight, you shall see
her chamber window entered, even the night before
her wedding day. If you love her then, tomorrow wed
her. But it would better fit your honour to change your
mind.

CLAUDIO

May this be so?

DON PEDRO

I will not think it.

DON JOHN

If you dare not trust that you see, confess not
that you know. If you will follow me I will show you
enough, and when you have seen more and heard more,
proceed accordingly.

CLAUDIO

If I see anything tonight why I should not marry
her, tomorrow, in the congregation where I should
wed, there will I shame her.

DON PEDRO

And as I wooed for thee to obtain her, I will
Join with thee to disgrace her.
(III, ii, 92-117)

Of course this has a superficial plausibility. But how does Don John know what will transpire in Hero's window in a few hours? Is standing watch there in the middle of the night his habitual pastime? What other persons can corroborate his allegations? Why wouldn't Don Pedro say the following to his bastard brother?

Tarry, sir.
Was it not but a few hours since thou whispered
falsely in Claudio's ear that I was in love with Hero
and wooed on my own behalf for her hand
in marriage? Yet Leonato confirmed I
wooed for Claudio. Why would'st thou slander
me with your bastardly shame, tell lies of me
to make of me a liar? Everyone can see thy
jealousy, the ill-will thou bear'st me, how you would
blacken my reputation. Down what path of

folly would’st thou lead’st us now to mar us
with your own mischief?

Yet neither Claudio nor Don Pedro challenges Don John. Instead, they agree to gather under Hero’s window to see what Don John wishes them to see. It will be his little stage production, with the interpretation provided in advance. At this point, there is more intelligence in bumbling Dogberry and his Watch than in Don Pedro and Claudio put together. Instead of squaring off against the meretricious Don John, a proven deceiver as to this very issue, the virtue of Hero, Claudio seems to re-ignite a smoldering indignation against her, going so far as to declare that should he find ocular confirmation of her alleged infidelity he will “shame her” in the imminent nuptials. Is such an awful and irretrievable response necessary? Suppose the evidence Claudio is presented admits of more than one interpretation or construction – and leads to a revelation that Don John is again guilty of the same defamatory conduct? How will the threatened damage to Hero be undone? In his wrath, Claudio forgets he’s just been down this road of error. Fooled once, he would have his folly confirmed beyond repair. And this is precisely what happens. It is arranged by Don John that in the dark of night at Hero’s window Don John’s associate Borachio should embrace the serving woman Margaret so as to give to Claudio and Don Pedro the false impression of Hero’s promiscuous infidelity. (III, iii, 134-156) The ruse works. Hero is grossly humiliated by Claudio next morning before the priest and wedding guests, a sad scene we have no need to review. Shakespeare’s concern is obviously not with the perfidious Don John but with credulous Claudio, whose love for Hero has been mishandled from the beginning. Had he been more forthright, all this harm might have been avoided. The first and most fundamental error, of course, was placing his suit in the hands of a third party, Don Pedro, who volunteered to impersonate him in disguise and win by a sort of guile Hero’s love and consent to marry. Under those dubious circumstances it is not exactly clear who Hero actually consents to marry. Don Pedro does not expressly approach Hero in his own person (as Suffolk approaches Lady Margaret on behalf of Henry); rather, Don Pedro adds an additional confusion by impersonating Claudio and wooing Hero privately. This scheme plays into Don John’s hands by allowing Claudio to wonder in whose name the suit to Hero proceeded. One almost wants to demand, “Why didn’t you speak for yourself, Claudio?” echoing Priscilla Mullens in Longfellow’s *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. It is plain that wooing by proxy has disturbing consequences in both *King Henry VI* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Can the ladies get any better results? It’s time now to turn to our cross dressing heroines. Let’s not keep them waiting. (*As You Like It*, III, ii, 293-324; IV, i, 37-58)

3. Julia as Sebastian

Wooing by proxy afforded Shakespeare an opportunity in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Twelfth*

Night to explore a pair of opposed features of love: eros (desire) and benevolence (caritas). Though in historical terms these forms emerged independently, the courtly love which arose in the 14th century with the Cathars and Troubadours embraced both aspects, which melded adventitiously over a period of five centuries to become our popular notion of romance. Midway in this evolutionary process, Shakespeare presented a comic dissection of modern love, exposing its heterogeneous features. Of course, so long as interests coincide no tension arises, as, for example, where the wartime nurse cares for her lover, the wounded soldier. But what happens when the beloved turns to seek his happiness in a rival admirer? Suppose the two suitors are friends? Can charity overcome jealousy for the welfare of the love object? This is the very theme Shakespeare was to return to much later in Sonnet 116, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments," in which the narrator makes an ironic sacrifice of his own desires for the sake of his friends' happiness.

Valentine, a youth of Verona, decides to leave his friend Proteus to seek adventure in Milan. Proteus protests. He is content to pursue his love, Julia, at home in Verona, and wishes that Valentine would remain and find such bliss for himself. When Antonio sends his son Proteus to Milan shortly thereafter, his budding romance with Julia is interrupted, though the lovers exchange rings as tokens of perpetual devotion. Meanwhile, Valentine is completely captivated by Silvia, the ravishing daughter of the Duke of Milan. Outwardly vain and self-absorbed, Silvia is in fact secretly and genuinely in love with Valentine, but dallies so as to enjoy his ardent suit for her favors. No sooner does Proteus arrive than he finds himself mimetically smitten by Silvia as well, and plans to abandon Julia and steal Silvia from Valentine. His soliloquy, a string of self-serving sophisms, anatomizes unsparingly the mind of a cad.

> To leave my Julia shall I be forsworn;
> To love fair Silvia shall I be forsworn;
> To wrong my friend I shall be much forsworn.
> And e'en that power which gave me first my oath
> Provokes me to this threefold perjury.
> Love bade me swear, and love bides me forswear.
> O sweet –suggesting love, if thou hast sinned
> Teach me, thy tempted subject, to excuse it.
> At first I did adore a twinkling star,
> But now I worship a celestial sun.
> Unheedful vows may heedfully be broken,
> And he wants wit that wants resolv?d will

To learn his wit t’exchange the bad for better.
Fie, fie, unreverent tongue, to call her bad
Whose sovereignty so oft thou hast preferred
With twenty thousand soul-confirming oaths.
I cannot leave to love, and yet I do.
But there I leave to love where I should love.
Julia I lose, and Valentine I lose.
If I keep them I needs must lose myself.
If I lose them, thus find I by their loss
For Valentine, myself, for Julia, for Silvia.
I to myself am dearer than a friend,
For love is still most precious in itself,
And Silvia – witness heaven that made her fair –
Shows Julia but a swarthy Ethiope.
I will forget that Julia is alive,
Rememb’ring that my love to her is dead,
And Valentine I’ll hold an enemy,
Aiming at Silvia as a sweeter friend.
I cannot now prove constant to myself
Without some treachery used to Valentine.
This night he meaneth with a corded ladder
To climb celestial Silvia’s chamber-window,
Myself in counsel his competitor.
Now presently I’ll give her father notice
Of their disguising and pretended flight,
Who, all enraged, will banish Valentine;
For Thurio he intends shall wed his daughter.
But Valentine being gone, I’ll quickly cross
By some sly trick blunt Thurio’s dull proceeding.
Love, lend me wings to make my purpose swift,
As thou hast lent me wit to plot this drift.
(II, vi, 1-43)

After scheming to get Valentine exiled by the Duke, Proteus has eliminated his major rival, and turns his attentions to the pursuit of Silvia. Back in Verona, Julia is suffering without her swain Proteus and determines to dress as a male page, Sebastian, and travel *solus* to Milan to be reunited with him. Unfortunately, the moment she arrives, she finds her adored Proteus

serenading Silvia beneath her balcony. When Silvia appears and rejects his advances, reminding him of his commitment to Julia, Proteus declares that Julia is dead – and so is Valentine! The lady is not taken in. The most she will grant this callow fellow is a portrait of herself she keeps within.

The name adopted by Julia, “Sebastian,” is significant. In the only other Shakespeare comedy in which a transvestite heroine woos a woman on behalf of the man she loves, that intermediating heroine, Viola, has a twin brother called Sebastian. It is fairly plain that when Shakespeare came to compose *Twelfth Night* he did so with *The Two Gentlemen* in mind. In effect, then, Julia is Viola’s spiritual sister, implying the possibility that a romantic love might spring up between Silvia and “Sebastian,” as Olivia becomes hopelessly enamored of “Cesario.” Of course, as Silvia is already in love with Valentine, this does not happen. And in *Twelfth Night*, Olivia, falling in love with “Cesario,” later transfers this affection to Viola’s *doppelgänger*, Sebastian.

Finding himself rebuffed in his attempted seduction, Proteus abandons hope of a frontal assault on this noble lady, and, casting about for a device, meets the page-boy “Sebastian,” to whom he finds himself curiously drawn.

> PROTEUS
>
> Sebastian, I have entertain?d thee
> Partly that I have need of such a youth
> That can with some discretion do my business,
> For ‘tis no trusting to yon foolish lout,
> But chiefly for thy face and thy behavior,
> Which, if my augury deceive me not,
> Witness good bringing up, fortune, and truth.
> Therefore know thou, for this I entertain thee.
> Go presently, and take this ring with thee.
> Deliver it to Madam Silvia.
> She loved me well and delivered it to me.
> (IV, iv, 61-71)

Here is the appointment of proxy captured in the instant. There is something comforting and reassuring about Sebastian’s face that leads Sir Proteus to trust him. It speaks of a certain fidelity he can almost recall but not quite. In many such instances, Shakespeare toys with his characters as he teases us. It is almost as though the disguise were seen through, and yet it

isn’t. The observer in question knows, yet does not, in the way we fumble for a name on the tip of our tongue. If we didn’t know it, how could we dredge it up? Hence the Vaishnava sages say of our sense of death: “They know, yet they know it not.” Proteus sees his Julia, and yet he knows her not. That is why such scenes are successful onstage despite the audience’s clear ability to recognize the disguised character: the sheer transparency of the deception illustrates the obtuseness of the misapprehending character and heightens the poignancy of the encounter.

JULIA

It seems you loved not her, to leave her token.
Is she dead belike?

PROTEUS

Not so. I think she lives.

JULIA

Alas.

PROTEUS

Why dost thou cry ‘Alas’?

JULIA

I cannot choose but pity her.

PROTEUS

Wherefore shoulds’t thou pity her?

JULIA

Because methinks that she loved you as well
As you do love your lady Silvia.
She dreams on him that has forgot her love;
You dote on her that cares not for your love.
‘Tis pity love should be so contrary,
And thinking on it makes me cry ‘Alas’.

PROTEUS

Well, give her that ring, and therewithal
This letter. (*Pointing*) That’s her chamber. Tell my
Lady I claim the promise of her heavenly picture.
Your message done, hie home to my chamber,
Where thou shalt find me sad and solitary.
(IV, iv, 72-87)

He will not listen, but cuts her off with his errant errand. Then he leaves us with the central soliloquy of the play.

JULIA

How many women would do such a message?
Alas, poor Proteus, thou hast entertained
A fox to be the shepherd of thy lambs.
Alas, poor fool, why do I pity him
That with his very heart despiseth me?
Because he loves her, he despiseth me.
Because I love him, I must pity him.
The ring I gave him when he parted from me,
To bind him to remember my good will.
And now am I, unhappy messenger,
To plead for that which I would not obtain;
To carry that which I would have refused;
To praise his faith, which I would have dispraised.
I am my master’s true-confirm?d love,
But cannot be true servant to my master
Unless I prove false traitor to myself.
Yet will I woo for him, but yet so coldly
As, heaven it knows, I would not have him speed.
(IV, iv, 88-105)

Things are worse, then, for Julia than they are for Viola/Cesario. The latter’s dilemma is to woo as proxy for the man she loves; Julia, on the other hand, is sent to woo for he who plighted unto her his troth, and that makes a world of difference. Viola undermines herself, yet does not betray herself, as does Julia. In all of Shakespeare, it could be argued this is

the most singular sacrifice. It may be done coldly, as she says, but it will be done well. How is it possible? On account of what we might call love's impurity, its divided nature: "Because I love him, I must pity him." Insofar as I need him and desire him, giving him to another is unthinkable. But insofar as I love him in the sense of caring for him, caring for his happiness, I must let him go. That is the contradiction lurking in the heart of love exposed by Shakespeare's use of suit by proxy. The problem is not imposed on love by the trope of proximate wooing, rather, the hybridized character of love, its inner tensions and inconsistencies, are revealed as in a roentgenogram in this context. Yet through it all, perhaps the reader will agree, there remains an element of hope. Who knows what lies ahead? Confrontation and quarreling would only drive a wedge between Julia and her wayward swain. After all, the ardor of Proteus is not reciprocated by Silvia. To whom might he return when steadfast Silvia passes forever out of reach and the bubble of delusion bursts, if not she who has done everything and more for him?

In their conversation, Silvia's concern for jilted Julia is most evident.

> SILVIA
>
> She is beholden to thee, gentle youth.
> Alas, poor lady, desolate and left.
> I weep myself to think upon they words.
> Here youth. There is my purse. I give thee this
> For thy sweet mistess' sake, because thou lov'st her.
> Farewell.
> (IV, iv, 170-176)

And so it is. At the play's conclusion, Julia doffs her boyish garments sufficiently to show doltish Proteus the magnitude of his error.

> Behold her that gave aim to all thy oaths
> And entertained 'em deeply in her heart.
> How oft hast thou with perjury cleft the root?
> O, Proteus, let this habit make thee blush.
> Be thou ashamed that I have took upon me
> Such immodest raiment, if shame live
> In a disguise of love.
> It is the lessor blot, modesty finds,
> Women to change their shapes than men their minds.

(V, iv, 100-108)

This, of course recalls such lines as:

“By all the vows that ever men have broke-
In number more than ever women spoke.”
(*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I, I, 175-176)

and the wry song in *Much Ado About Nothing*:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.
    Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea, and one on shore,
    To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
    And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
    Into hey nonny, nonny.
(II, iii, 61-76).

Here the scales fall from the eyes of Proteus.

PROTEUS

Than men their minds! ‘Tis true. O, heaven, were man
But constant, he were perfect. That one error
Fills him with faults, makes him run through all th’ sins;
Inconstancy falls off ere it begins.
What is in Silvia’s face but I may spy
More fresh in Julia’s, with a constant eye?
(V, iv, 109-114)

Thus Proteus discovers that he has gained more by the failure of love by proxy than he ever could have by its supposed success.

4. Viola as Cesario

In previous essays we have discussed Cesario’s embassage unto Olivia. For our purposes, that wooing is distinguished as the finest and most brilliant proxy effort to be found in Shakespeare. No other agents rise to such heights except Rosalind, who is arguably non-

mortal. But as surpassingly eloquent as Viola is, her speech is not carried aloft by her own genius alone. Rather, it is fueled by subterranean passions. She is not a mere messenger, a paid fee post who recites a script she has "conned." She is a lover who yearns for love. To understand this we should recall that Viola still feels the loss of her father, and, for most of the play, the brother Sebastian she believes has drowned in the shipwreck which cast her up into Illyria. These losses resonate with Olivia, who is in mourning for her brother and has still not recovered from her father's death. These fundamental griefs roil at the bottom of both women's souls. On top of this in Viola is her craving for Duke Orsino, for whom she woos Lady Olivia so vivaciously. Thus, when in answer to Olivia's "Why, what would you?" Viola declaims the extraordinary "Make me a willow cabin at your gate . . . ," (I, v, 257-265) her speech is inspired by the affections for a lost father, brother and potential lover, Duke Orsino. What Olivia hears in Cesario's voice, then, is far from the sort of mechanical recitation to which she has been exposed courtesy of Duke Orsino. All the throbbing emotion locked up inside her comes pouring out, not chaotically, but in the most exquisite language conceivable. And it is this passionate peroration that sweeps Olivia off her feet. Deaf to Orsino's entreaties, Olivia is won by the hunger another woman has for him, deflected to herself.

Like the proxy wooings of Suffolk, Don Pedro and Julia, that of Cesario is a failure in the sense that the intended union (Orsino and Olivia) is not achieved. Yes, it's true that Claudio and Hero eventually wed festively along with Beatrice and Benedick, but the original Hero must die first of embarrassment and be resurrected. For this Don Pedro can hardly take credit. Remember that he shared in Claudio's impulsive wish to shame her at the ill-starred wedding and in fact does so. (IV, I, 64-65; 88-94) But the excited longing Olivia feels for the impossibly gendered "Cesario" is soon transferred to sibling Sebastian, and when Orsino comes to his senses and embraces Viola, all is well as the two couples join hands.

5. Rosalind as Ganymede

What makes Ganymede stand out from the other intermediaries? To answer this question we must address another: What sets Rosalind apart? There is a kind of vibrancy in her character that intrigues us. Despite her persecution by Duke Frederick and her love for the stalwartly normal Orlando, there is about her a kind of playful autonomy, a preternatural effervescence that sets her above other lovers and proxies. We are reminded of a comment by England's poet laureate and scholar Ted Hughes: "*Shakespeare seems to have difficulty in making his women real . . . . One is more than a little aware that a new, much bigger, extra dimension has opened behind them. They . . . produce an uncomfortable impression . . . willfully committed to awkwardly superhuman roles. [S]hakespeare has some difficulty bringing these women down to*

earth. This is evident in what they say, but it is visible too in various details." Such heroines, "blushing into hectic, sexual life, are only just touching earth with their toes." (Hughes, 3-4) And it is submitted that this prescient insight of Hughes is more applicable to Rosalind than to any other female lead in Shakespeare. Rightly apprehended, then, "Ganymede" is a shadow of divinity, as his name implies.

The wooing in *As You like it* is remarkable insofar as Rosalind serves as her own proxy in the form of Ganymede. When she and Celia (Aliena) flee to the Forest of Arden they are of course not alone. Duke Senior and his merry men are there, along with jester Touchstone and goatherd Audrey, pastorals Silvius and Phoebe, and most importantly, young Orlando, the ardent young son of Sir Rowland de Bois, who busies himself hanging his homespun verses in Rosalind's honor on the trees, or carving her name in their bark. In love with Orlando since he overthrew Charles the wrestler in Act 1, Rosalind faces a dilemma in that her identity-in-exile is Ganymede, a form she is not ready to surrender so long as she is threatened by Duke Frederick. Her male pose stands in the way of any intimacies with the love-sick Orlando.

This seeming impasse proves expedient, however, in that it provides a chance for her to test Orlando's character and love without being recognized by him. At least, that is what she supposes. In Act 3, Sc. 2 there is a piquant exchange in which Ganymede agrees to counsel Orlando to cure him of his desire for Rosalind. Once again, Shakespeare stresses the nearly pathological nature of love.

> ROSALIND
>
> Love is merely a madness, and I tell you,
> deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen