

TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA A EUPHUISTIC STORY BY EDWARD DE VERE

By Charles Graves

In several previous articles on Euphues, a character of the 16th-century English writer John Lyly, we have shown how Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, Lyly's employer, shared John Lyly's ideas in his 'Shakespeare' plays both comic and tragic (see *de Vere Society Newsletter* April 2020, July 2021). We see similar Euphuistic views of women in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* as well as an autobiographical element of sexual ambiguity in the life of the author.

Euphuism was a school of poetic creation (over against the *Romanticism* of the Sydneys) in the late 16th-century England and was based upon Lyly's popular book *Euphues and his England* (1580). *Euphues*, a young Athenian man having spent some time at the court in Naples, came to England with his friend and fellow scholar *Philautus* to experience English social and courtly life. After a period of introduction, Euphues learns about English women at court, and that his attitude concerning their actions and opinions differed from that of *Philautus* and thus Euphues decides to part ways from him – Euphues praising the ladies and their relations to men whereas *Philautus* preserves a traditional male-centred 'patriarchal' vision. Because of John Lyly's book on Euphues, a 'Euphuistic' view of ladies developed both in society at large and apparently influenced Edward de Vere himself in his writings.

We shall see that the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* presented the same divergent views of ladies as did Euphues and *Philautus* in Lyly's work. *Two Gentlemen* begins with Valentine deciding to go off to Milan to fulfil his worldly ambitions at the 'court of the Emperor', whereas his friend *Proteus* remains in Verona with his girlfriend Julia. But eventually *Proteus* joins his friend at the court where he finds that Valentine plans to elope outside Milan with the Duke's daughter, Sylvia. The Duke had preferred another son-in-law called *Thurio*, and he asks *Proteus* to help *Thurio* write persuasive love-letters to Sylvia. *Proteus* has also uncovered the elopement plans of his friend Valentine who has meanwhile been exiled by the Duke, whereas Sylvia has been placed under house-arrest. *Proteus* meets Sylvia and begins to love her, preferring her to the girlfriend he left behind in Verona.

At this stage of the comedy, we see that Valentine has remained faithful in his love for Sylvia, even having been exiled for it, whereas Proteus has not only taken part in the Duke's plans to have Thurio marry her but has also helped the Duke prevent the elopement of the couple (which includes Proteus' good friend Valentine). Moreover, Proteus is telling us about his new passion for Sylvia, replacing Julia. These various types of attitudes towards, and commitments to, lady friends is quite striking and we wonder how the author will resolve the pending issues.

The solution is provided by Julia who decides to be dressed as a 'page-boy', to go to the court, and to watch over her friend Proteus – whose interest in Sylvia has been told to her. Arriving in Milan, she gains employment with Proteus – who doesn't recognize her in disguise. She also comes to know Sylvia (still under house-arrest) and they share information about 'Julia' whom the 'page-boy' supposedly served in Verona.

But Sir Eglamour, a friend, helps Sylvia to escape from her home and she finds herself in a forest – where she is captured by outlaws and taken to see their new chief. The chief is Valentine who had met these outlaws when he was exiled. But Proteus and his page-boy (Julia), as well as Thurio, have been sent by the Duke to retrieve Sylvia – and they meet her, as well as Valentine. Sylvia still wants to be Valentine's wife and Valentine will fight against Thurio's efforts to marry her. Finally, Thurio decides it is not worth all the effort to obtain her hand, and desists. Also, it is revealed that the page-boy is Julia and Valentine obliges Proteus to shake hands with her – thus ending Proteus' romantic disassociation from her.¹ The Duke then releases Valentine from his ban and accepts Valentine as future son-in-law. At that moment Valentine asks the Duke his opinion about the page-boy and it appears that the Duke is not yet aware of the disguise. 'As we go along', Valentine tells everyone, 'we shall see how this affair ends with two happy marriages in the same house' and this implies that the second marriage will be Proteus marrying Julia.

Now we shall discuss a 'euphuistic' interpretation of this play and the possibility that it is an autobiographical play regarding Edward de Vere. But before this, let us see why the characters were given such names as they held. *Julia*, according to the *Smaller Classical Dictionary* (editor E. H. Blakeney 1919), was the name of at least seven wives, mothers or daughters of Roman emperors

and the *Gens Julia* was one of the most ancient patrician families in Rome (e.g. the family of Julius Caesar). *Valentine* was obviously taken from the name of several Roman emperors in the 4th-5th centuries called Valentinianus, or was the name of a Christian saint who became a symbol of earthly love. *Proteus* was an 'old man of the sea' and a vassal of Poseidon, whose flocks he attended. At midday, Proteus would arise from the sea and anyone who wished to know the future was obliged to catch his attention. Proteus then would assume every possible shape or venue in order to avoid prophesying, but finally he would tell the truth if he could not escape someone's persistent hold. In using Proteus as a major character, it was obviously the author's purpose to reveal from Proteus what he really thinks about women's love and love for women and thus, perhaps, to reveal some euphuistic ideals.

What, actually, did Proteus thus reveal? Perhaps it was that you should never force a woman to love you when she doesn't; that the woman who loves you and pursues it, is worthwhile agreeing to; and that you can have the love of a woman and also keep your male friend. All of these ideas seem to have been promoted in this play.

The Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities (editor Henry Thurston Peck) 1897, p.1322, provides some further information about Proteus. After her abduction, supposedly it was Proteus who took Helen away from her abductor Paris, gave a 'phantom Helen' to Paris and returned the real Helen to her husband Menelaus (after Menelaus' return from Troy). Is this represented in *The Two Gentlemen*? Obviously, Helen in the story could be Sylvia who is eventually returned to Valentine her beloved by the actions of Proteus together with Julia. Proteus did not have this in mind when he chased the fleeing Sylvia (who hoped to join Valentine in exile), but that was the final result of what Proteus and Julia (as page-boy) did. But we see that it was also Julia who saved both Valentine and Sylvia by 'counselling' the vacillating Proteus – in fact by chasing him in love as his servant. Moreover, it was the determined actions of the two women in chasing after their beloved that solved the problems involved in these two love-affairs. The men's actions, on the other hand, came to naught: Valentine's plans for a secret elopement; the Duke's plan for Thurio (and not Valentine) to marry Sylvia; Proteus' desire for this same Sylvia instead of loving Julia. These gave way to more rational solutions represented by the two ladies'

persistent love. But in the prelude to this there was a certain ‘learning experience’ of Proteus and perhaps that was why he was named after the classical Proteus who sometimes arises from the sea and gives counsel to humans.

There was another, perhaps less obvious, euphuistic implication at the end of this play: Valentine asks the Duke what he thinks of the page-boy (Julia in disguise) and the Duke says (probably not knowing yet that ‘he’ – the page-boy – was a disguise) replies that the boy had ‘grace in him’ and ‘had blushed’, after which Valentine says he will later explain everything about this affair. These few words about the page-boy may be an added autobiographical element indicating that the author’s view of love also includes love for a graceful boy (i.e. that which is many times expressed in the *Sonnets* as the author’s love for a young male).

Can *Two Gentlemen from Verona* thus be considered autobiographical? In such a case, one might begin to believe that the ‘Duke’ represents important persons at Court such as William Cecil, the Queen’s treasurer. The Duke’s daughter, i.e. Anne Cecil in the case of Edward de Vere, is the object of heterosexual love as was Sylvia for Valentine. But there was another suitor for the Duke’s daughter, i.e. Thurio. According to the ‘Duke’ this one would have been better for his daughter than that ‘squanderer of his family fortune’ Edward de Vere (Cecil’s known opinion of his son-in-law). Also, besides this obvious parallel of Edward to Valentine (i.e. lover of Anne Cecil) there was another Edward de Vere – the lover of the page-boy Julia which symbolized what we find in the *Sonnets* as Edward’s love for the young Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton. We recall that Henry was a tenant at William Cecil’s house on the Strand some years later than Edward de Vere – Edward being also in an ‘orphan status’ yet being much older than Henry.

In the play, Proteus (representing Edward’s heterosexuality) is repulsed by Sylvia, which may represent an incident during Edward’s trip to Italy in early 1570s when a rumour was circulating that the real father of Edward’s first daughter with Anne Cecil was not Edward but another man. When Proteus ‘shakes hands’ with the real Julia (still dressed as a page-boy) this illustrates Edward de Vere as loving a young lad (i.e. Henry Wriothesley in real life) thus representing his homosexuality. But the Duke (William Cecil) does not yet see this aspect of Proteus (Edward de Vere). Still thinking that the page-boy is male,

the Duke will be told eventually by Valentine that the page-boy is really a girl (Proteus' girlfriend) and then he will agree to the two marriages.

Another aspect implying that *Two Gentlemen* could be autobiographical, is the role played by Sir Eglamour.² His role is to help Sylvia escape house arrest and to re-join Valentine her beloved – this is a promotion of normal heterosexuality. But also, it may symbolize Edward's heterosexual affair with Anne Vavasour, the supposed 'dark lady' of the *Sonnets*. Because of this escape of Sylvia with Sir Eglamour, Proteus is sent out to fetch her (i.e. to promote his heterosexual tendency – his love for Sylvia) but this action ends up in his recognition of the page-boy as his real love. Thus Proteus (Edward de Vere) has these two 'loves' to deal with, and we ask how he is going to solve this. This also was displayed in the *Sonnets* where the author's passionate love for the 'dark lady' is seen in existential opposition to his love for a young man (Henry).

The name of Sir Eglamour may very well refer to the old English word 'glamour' or 'an attraction by outward appearance' (cf. *Oxford Dictionary*). 'Glamour' is apparently an alteration of 'grammar: occult practices associated with learning in medieval times'. Some of the *Sonnets* support the idea that the author inflicted upon himself certain practices to heal an (undescribed) disease and possibly such cures were to heal the homosexual aspects of an apparent bisexuality. What was happening in Edward de Vere's real life may have ended up being penned in the play as the experience of Proteus in the woods searching for Sylvia (object of his heterosexual desire) which was, in the end, thwarted by Sylvia's continued love for Valentine. It was also changed when Proteus 'shook hands' with the page-boy Julia. The latter would be an acceptance by Edward of his bi-sexual tendencies. An implied message here would be to 'let sexuality be itself' and not try to replace it by abnormal introduction of heterosexuality through some magical powers of 'glamour'.

Thus, we have seen that *Two Gentlemen* can be considered 'euphuistic' in the spirit of John Lyly, as well as autobiographical – referring to various aspects within the bi-sexuality of Edward de Vere.

End notes:

1. This truth is revealed in the play: Julia, as page-boy, makes statements about two rings which she is carrying and thereby reveals her own identity. If ever the play had been translated into Venetian, those understanding it might have noted the ring (*vera* in Venetian) becoming its plural *vere* and consequently be aware of the author's name (cf. *De Vere Newsletter* October 2021 in an article by Ian Haste on the same *motif* in *The Merchant of Venice*). Moreover, perhaps it is significant that Valentine demanded Proteus and Julia to 'shake hands', showing a certain reconciliation. But such an action between men and women seems quite unusual. After all, Julia had already been recognized (by most of the characters) as the person behind the page-boy disguise. Was Valentine trying (for the Duke's sake) to protect the illusion that the reconciliation involved two males agreeing (Proteus and the page-boy)? And was such hand-shaking directed towards satisfying a Puritan-minded 'William Cecil' type of 'Duke' that there was nothing amiss, thus hiding such matters as bi-sexuality? After this, Valentine is heard to say that, 'walking along I shall inform everyone what has really happened about the two marriages which shall occur in one house'.
2. Besides Sir Eglamour, the names of three other characters may be significant: *Thurio*, the courtesan and possible husband of Sylvia according to the Duke's desire, may represent the ancient Italian city of *Thurian* founded mainly by the Athenians in 443 BC and obliquely reminding us that Euphues was an Athenian who had visited Naples. Then, there are several episodes about *Lance with his dog Crab* ('bark' spelled backwards). Lance is Proteus' servant and a buffoon. His activities at court seem to resemble what William Shakespeare may have been in that *milieu*.

The hypothesis is that the 'Lance' person in the play corresponds to the 'spear' of Shakespeare. In any case, Lance shall be known to playgoers as the person whose 'dog pissed in court on ladies' farthingales'. Lance's views on women, as presented in *Two Gentlemen*, were hardly of a courtly nature – as were John Lyly's euphuistic concepts – but rather of a common type involving opinions about kissing them and wives' breath.

As for *Sylvia*, the name obviously refers to *silva*, the Latin word for woods or forest where the main, concluding, events of the play take place. But there may also be a reference here to *Rhea Sylvia*, the mythological Roman mother of Romulus and Remus (were there, in the play, two wolf-cubs called Valentine and Proteus loving her?). Rhea Sylvia has been associated with another goddess called Cybele – the *Magna Mater*.