SUBJUNCTIVITY IN
THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA

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In an effort to focus more precisely on the pragmatic aspects of Shakespeare's art, I have employed the term "subjunctivity" to designate certain dramatic properties indicative of the playwright's manipulation of his audience. I have found the term especially useful in defining the uniqueness of the romantic comedies—plays I perceive as both literary artifacts and social documents. Subjunctivity, in relation to these plays, thus denotes at once an artistic strategy and a vision of life. The strategy, furthermore, promotes Shakespeare's recommendation of the vision. As dramatic method, subjunctivity refers to the playwright's persistent balancing of opposing forces in the comedies. We note, on the one hand, those aspects of the drama designed to involve or psychologically engage an audience in the life of the play—such things as authentic, prose discourse; convincing character development; suspense; realism; the impression of genuine, human emotion; and the like. These things constitute the "assertion" of a play. On the other hand, we mark the qualifications of that assertion—the hypotheticalities, or chiefly "meta-dramatic" factors, which serve to offset the engaging appeal of the dramatic illusion. These aspects of the plays function to disengage us by calling attention to the artifice of the dramatic worlds—such things as poetry, song, and stylized rhetoric, disguise and conventional posturing, plays-within-plays, and other instances of "theatricality."

Unbalanced in the tragedies to encourage affective
(purgative) involvement of audience, these dual forces are equally and simultaneously counterpoised in the comedies to elicit from an audience a cognitive and critical scrutiny of the drama and its meaning vis-a-vis "real life." In this way Shakespeare encourages us to discover an implicit recommendation in the plays, an implication about the value of the theatrum mundi metaphor as a model for life. We are led to recognize that human experience is best perceived subjunctively; it is best perceived as tentative—real and theatrical at the same time. Man can, ironically, best achieve what is most genuine and enduring by discovering and self-consciously exploiting hypothetical or theatrical modes. To illustrate this in the plays themselves, Shakespeare gives us examples of the efficacy of the subjunctive perspective in his leading roles. Julia, Petruchio, Viola, Rosalind—all demonstrate the usefulness of subjunctive vision, the "rightness" of using hypotheticality as entrance into life, as the proper means to confront and shape human experience.

I hope now to flesh out the foregoing generalizations by examining some particulars from The Two Gentlemen of Verona. One is almost obliged, at the beginning of any discussion of The Two Gentlemen of Verona, to concede the play's fundamental weaknesses. Faced with the body of existing criticism on the play, one feels out of line to do otherwise. Those commentators who dare to do more than demonstrate new ways in which the play does not work have tried to save it by bringing variously colored lights to bear upon its difficulties. One camp would have us consider Valentine's outrageous behavior in Act V, for instance, as reflecting the influence of John Lyly, whose treatment (in Euphues and Endimion) of the conflicting claims of romantic love and male friendship was familiar and sensible to Shakespeare's audience.¹ Others struggle to make a case for the "education" motif in the play; these critics generally maintain that the process of self-discovery for the naive heroes requires drastic measures and results.² Some see the play as an early experiment with the great themes of forgiveness and reconciliation that would be handled more adroitly in the later comedies and in King Lear as well.³ And