

The Two Gentlemen of Verona

INTRODUCTION

THE accomplished elegance of the lyrical verse in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, as well as the skilful, theatrically effective prose of Lance's monologues, demonstrates that Shakespeare had already developed his writing skills when he composed this play. Nevertheless—and although the earliest mention of it is by Francis Meres in 1598—it may be his first work for the stage; for its dramatic structure is comparatively unambitious, and while some of its scenes are expertly constructed, those involving more than, at the most, four characters betray an uncertainty of technique suggestive of inexperience. It was first printed in the 1623 Folio.

The friendship of the 'two gentlemen'—Valentine and Proteus—is strained when both fall in love with Silvia. Proteus has followed Valentine from Verona to Milan, leaving behind his beloved Julia, who in turn follows him, disguised as a boy. At the climax of the action Valentine displays the depth of his friendship by offering Silvia to Proteus. The conflicting claims of love and friendship illustrated in this plot had been treated in a considerable body of English literature written by the time Shakespeare wrote his play, probably in the late 1580s. John Lyly's didactic fiction *Euphues* (1578) was an immensely popular example; and Lyly's earliest plays, such as *Campaspe* (1584) and *Endimion* (1588), influenced Shakespeare's style as well as his subject matter. Shakespeare was writing in a fashionable mode, but his story of Proteus and Julia is specifically (though perhaps indirectly) indebted to a prose fiction, *Diana*, written in Spanish by the Portuguese Jorge de Montemayor and first published in 1559. Many other influences on the young dramatist may be discerned: his idealized portrayal of Silvia and her relationship with Valentine derives from the medieval tradition of courtly love; Arthur Brooke's long poem *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562) provided some details of the plot; and the comic commentary on the romantic action supplied by the page-boy Speed and the more rustic clown Lance has dramatic antecedents in English plays such as Lyly's early comedies.

Though the play was presumably acted in Shakespeare's time, its first recorded performance is in 1762, in a rewritten version at Drury Lane. Later performances have been sparse, and the play has succeeded best when subjected to adaptation, increasing its musical content, adjusting the emphasis of the last scene so as to reduce the shock of Valentine's donation of Silvia to Proteus, and updating the setting. It can be seen as a dramatic laboratory in which Shakespeare first experimented with conventions of romantic comedy which he would later treat with a more subtle complexity, but it has its own charm. If the whole is not greater than the parts, some of the parts—such as Lance's brilliant monologues, and the delightful scene (4.2) in which Proteus serenades his new love with 'Who is Silvia?' while his disguised old love, Julia, looks wistfully on—are wholly successful. And Lance's dog, Crab, has the most scene-stealing non-speaking role in the canon: this is an experiment that Shakespeare did not repeat.