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INTRODUCTION

Date

The date for the composition of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* cannot be given with certainty. Before the posthumous publication of the text in the Folio of 1623, there is only one contemporary reference to it, in the form of Frances Meres's praise of Shakespeare as a consummate writer of comedies and tragedies in his *Palladis Tamia* (1598): 'for Comedy, witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Loue labors lost*, his *Loue labors wonne*, his *Midsummers night dreame*, his *Merchant of Venice*'. Though the title given by Meres is not quite complete, it is unreasonable to doubt that it refers to our play. A look at his list of tragedies shows that the sequence of titles does not reliably inform us about the order of composition. Nor does the fact that the play relies heavily on a section of Montemayor's *Diana* offer help in dating it.[1] This prose romance, written in Spanish, first appeared in 1542 and was translated into French by Nicholas Collin in 1578. Yong's English translation only appeared in 1598 but is known to have been completed by 1582. There was also an anonymous play acted before the court in early 1585, but now lost, whose title, *The History of Felix and Philiomena*, suggests that it may have relied on the same story-insert as Shakespeare did. This drama, if it really was a treatment of Montemayor's story, may have contributed the initial idea to Shakespeare's play. However, in view of the mass of detailed correspondences between the story and Shakespeare's text, it seems best to assume a direct knowledge of Montemayor in its English translation.

The limited dramatic technique in *The Two Gentlemen* – its heavy reliance on monologue and duologue, the artificial balancing of pairs of lovers and pairs of servants, the lyrical qualities of some of its speeches and other features of its style – has been taken to indicate an early place for it in the Shakespearean canon, but the actual dating and placing remain more or less informed guesswork. E. K. Chambers proposed that it was written in 1594 or 1595 after *The Taming of the Shrew* and before *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Romeo and Juliet*.[2] E. A. J. Honigmann suggested that its composition was as early as 1587, assuming it to be Shakespeare's first attempt at comedy.[3] His dating is not founded on new material relating specifically to this text but derives from a general pre-dating of Shakespeare's beginnings as a writer of plays. He has convincingly demonstrated that Chambers's chronology of the apprenticeship plays needs to be challenged. He opposes to the orthodox

[1] To be consulted in Judith M. Kennedy (ed.), *A Critical Edition of Young's Translation of George of Montemayor's 'Diana'*, 1968.
[2] E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, 2 vols., 1930, I, 270.
[3] E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare's Impact on his Contemporaries*, 1982, p. 88.

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'late start' theory an 'early start' theory which attempts to redefine the relation of some early Shakespearean plays to those which have traditionally been taken as their 'source plays'. He maintains that these need not have preceded their Shakespearean counterparts but may have been competing with theatrically successful Shakespearean productions. Honigmann regards *The Troublesome Reign* (published in 1591) – which in his view follows Shakespeare's *King John* as well as *Richard III* – as the new keystone of the chronology of the early plays. In consequence of a later reference by Ben Jonson to the period of Senecan tragedies, he tentatively attributes the composition of *Titus Andronicus* to the year 1586 and thinks this play was then followed by *The Two Gentlemen* in 1587. However, the traditional view that Shakespeare began his career as a comic writer with *The Comedy of Errors*, a play in which he could use the experience gained by reading Latin comedies in his school-days, seems more plausible than to see him start out with the more original venture *The Two Gentlemen*, in which he found the basis of his own peculiar kind of comedy and to which he returned for devices to be reused and redeveloped in many of his maturer works. The dating and ordering of Shakespeare's experimental comedies remain a matter of conjecture, but it is not impossible that the creation of our play must be sought in the late 1580s, whatever the sequence of these early plays may be. Unfortunately, no records of Elizabethan performances of *The Two Gentlemen* have come down to us.

Themes and criticism

With *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* Shakespeare, for the first time, turned to the matter and motifs of romance, making them the vehicle of his comedy. Since similar material would become the basis of his later and more appreciated comedies, his earlier venture has tended to be misjudged. Criticism of the play has too often been based on the assumption that the author intended, or should have intended, to write something like *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It* but, being young and newly apprenticed to the playwright's trade, had not known how to achieve this and had therefore failed. Attempts to reconstruct a direct line of development from the young to the mature Shakespeare have so far served only to denigrate the early play and put critics into the dangerous position of offering their belated advice as to what he should have done. A case in point is H. B. Charlton's treatment of the play, which, after offering much pertinent information about the background of the materials used, concludes: 'Clearly, Shakespeare's first attempt to make romantic comedy had only succeeded so far that it had unexpectedly and inadvertently made romance comic.'[1] The easiest way out of this self-forged dilemma would be simply to accept that what seems to be ridiculous in the play was meant to be so and was intended to be enjoyed as such. But bardolatry and ingrained convictions about the high educative mission of poets seem to have made the acceptance of such a position

[1] H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearian Comedy*, 1938, p. 43.

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difficult. John Vyvyan offered the last great attempt to disregard what had been disturbing to other critics and bury it in his own allegorical reading of the play as an arcane exposition of highest Platonic and neo-Platonic wisdom.[1] In doing this, he has commanded some admiration but in recent times very little following.

To the mind of the purist, a mixture of the literary modes of romance and satire seems as inconceivable as that of fire and vinegar. But since Miguel de Cervantes has shown that out of such ingredients even masterpieces of world literature can be made, we should not think it impossible that the young Shakespeare started out on his career as a writer of comic plays by attempting to present a quixotic hero to his audience. Though traditional Shakespeare criticism has chosen not to admire the young writer for this daring attempt, we should not continue the practice of holding his later achievements against him when dealing with his early beginnings. We know something about the theatrical conditions under which the mature comedies were meant to be performed, but we know nothing about the stage and the audience for which this early piece was invented. The history of its later productions shows that the official theatre was likely to run into trouble with its presentation and that it was more likely to exert an immediate appeal when played by young actors or semi-professionals to young audiences in university theatres or under circumstances similar to these.[2] It is therefore not inconceivable that the play was meant to be performed under such conditions and before such audiences.

An explanation for this state of affairs may perhaps be found in the fact that the play uses educational matters more specifically than others. Two recent studies have dealt with this issue in detail. Peter Lindenbaum describes the action of the play as a series of educational processes that can be finally resolved by a happy ending when the more limited educational goal of the perfect courtier and gentleman is accommodated within a more comprehensive Christian view of man as an essentially fallible entity.[3] His paper has provoked a very subtly argued defence of the play as illustrating a successful education of the hero according to the ideals propounded in the courtesy book tradition. Camille Wells Slights's paper is particularly strong in relating the discussion of the role of the gentlemanly art of language in Castiglione's *The Courtier* to the conduct of the characters in Shakespeare's play, but it seems weaker in distinguishing between the conceptions of the nature of love and friendship and the different roles attributed to them in the works of Castiglione and Shakespeare respectively.[4] In C. W. Slights's view, Valentine lives up to

[1] John Vyvyan, *Shakespeare and the Rose of Love*, 1960, pp. 98–135.
[2] Numerous productions at English and American universities would testify to this if only we were able to document them all. But we have the corroboration of Arthur Holmberg, who confessed that a student production of the Royal Scottish Academy on the fringe of the Edinburgh Festival, and especially the youthfulness of the two actors playing Valentine and Proteus, inspired him to a new understanding of the play ('*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: Shakespearean comedy as a rite of passage', *Queen's Quarterly* 90 (1983), 33–44).
[3] Peter Lindenbaum, 'Education in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*', *SEL* 15 (1975), 229–44.
[4] Camille Wells Slights, '*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and the courtesy book tradition', *S.St.* 16 (1983), 13–31.

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the teachings he has received. Faced with the task of squaring these ideals with the exigencies of life, he encounters their inherent ambiguities, finally succeeding, by a process of trial and error, in solving all the problems with perfect *sprezzatura*. This includes the reconciliation with his former friend by offering him, in a magisterial courtly gesture, his own contracted bride, who, as a thoroughly educated lady, understands this artful ruse and beamingly stands by in approval of it. But against this interpretation one could hold that Castiglione must be seen as a practical educationist whereas Shakespeare was a writer of comic romance. Their standards in love and friendship differ accordingly. Castiglione's expectations with respect to love and friendship remain far more within the realm of what is practical and attainable than the phantoms the hero of romance finds himself pursuing.[1]

Working towards a closer understanding of the play, we should set aside the fact that the play has been described as a store-house for dramatic devices and motifs to which the dramatist later returned again and again – except that we may note in passing that he must have liked his early inventions enough to reuse them so often, dressing them up according to his later needs. But primarily we should look for such ideas as are unique to this text. Let us begin by observing that the play contains its own formulation of the primary goal of all education, the perfect gentleman:

> He is as worthy for an empress' love
> As meet to be an emperor's counsellor. (2.4.69–70)

Other plays by Shakespeare offer different descriptions of ideal manhood, but none is more comprehensive, more basic and more idealistic. In 'an emperor's counsellor' we can easily detect the goal educationists such as Sir Thomas Elyot and Baldassare Castiglione aimed at, namely to fashion the young nobleman into an able and competent adviser to his monarch. Shakespeare implies that the highest-ranking monarch deserves the highest-qualified advisers. The other qualification for the ideal gentleman – 'an empress' love' – may seem a bit more strange to many modern readers since it goes back to pre-Renaissance ideas of education. The exercise of courtly love was developed in the Middle Ages both to promote the knight's erudition in the literal sense of the word and to ensure his loyalty in service. Its ennobling effect was closely connected with the fact that this devotion was directed towards a lady of higher rank. The empress presumably deserves such courtly lovers as show the highest capability of being so ennobled. By the time Shakespeare wrote his play, the ideas of courtly love belonged primarily to the realm of romance and poetry rather than to real life, but it is just possible that the queen attempted to revive and reintroduce such ideas into practical politics in order to ensure the loyal service of her highest servants. Shakespeare's reaching back to

[1] If it should be argued against this differentiation that Castiglione allows his treatise to end with the exposition of Cardinal Bembo's highly idealistic views about love, it will be necessary to recall that these are meant for the benefit of elderly gentlemen rather than for neophytes of Valentine's type.

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medieval ideas of education may serve to render the goal more remote and more romantic, but we should not overlook the fact that the young playwright seasoned the heady wine of romance with considerable doses of vinegar. The formulation of the ideal goal is put into the mouth of the Duke, a character who, with respect to his own daughter, shows very little trust in the ennobling effect of love and seems to favour a suitor more for his money than for his capacities of mind and character. Moreover, the definition of the perfect gentleman is tentatively applied here to Proteus, a character who is later to play the part of the villain.

Romance rewards its heroes by letting them reach the goal they are seeking. In Shakespearean comedy, where this quest always takes the form of a love-quest, the prize to be won is represented by a superior lady. But in this play she is marked in such a way as to render her a more highly stylised idealisation of a woman than any of her much-admired successors in the later comedies. Not only does she receive – as does no other Shakespearean heroine – a public demonstration of general homage in a song praising her excellence, but she is also characterised by a trinity of qualities Shakespeare was never to use again. The standard characterisation of the perfect lady 'wise, fair and true', which not even the very fastidious Benedick in *Much Ado* dares to exceed when fantasising about the qualities of ideal womanhood, is here overtopped by 'Holy, fair and wise' (4.2.39) or, alternatively, 'too fair, too true, too holy' (4.2.5). In addition to all this, she is credited with a quality that is rare in the love poetry of these times, namely 'Kindness' (4.2.43). The two male leads, therefore, move through a world so highly idealised that reality must fall short of it. We learn little more about their past than that they were childhood companions. They may have attended the same school or shared tutors. Their age is nowhere precisely stated, but one of them thinks it is yet too early for them to fall in love and the other – already smitten by love – recognises that his father is unlikely to consent to an early marriage. Indeed his education-conscious relatives make it clear that he should enter into what we would nowadays call tertiary education. If the heroes of romance can be subjected to the realities of age at all, Proteus and Valentine should be around sixteen years old. But more revealing, perhaps, is the fact that in some educational systems their status would be described as 'sophomores'. Valentine starts out for the world in a way that could win the approval of all his teachers. The blame he heaps on his companion in the very first scene makes us recall the fruitless warnings old Eubulus offers to the young Euphues at the beginning of Lyly's famous novel. While Proteus unscrupulously suits all his actions to what his immediate interest seems to require, we must credit Valentine with an inspired enthusiasm for the pursuit of an 'angel-like perfection' (2.4.59) which he so generously but wrongly attributes to his companion. No wonder, then, that he should fall for Silvia and that Silvia should recognise his potential.

The situation of a young *ingénu* in a world that professes and teaches very high ideals without really making the effort of living up to them will always offer matter for mirth. But his position must become abysmally grotesque when the ideals taught not only differ widely from the reality they are meant to enhance and illuminate but

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in addition prove mutually exclusive. Romance usually perpetuated the medieval idea of elevating heterosexual love to a primary educative force, but Renaissance thought also revived the classical idea of friendship and, by idealising it, turned it into an alternative educative power. The romance of friendship differs from commonplace friendship as much as courtly love from the everyday experience. Both claim a union of two in one, expressed as 'one soul in bodies twayne' in the case of friendship and by the conceit of the exchange of hearts in the case of love. In this theory of friendship the emotional and practical benefits are clearly of secondary importance. Friendship is first and foremost seen as an institution that enables man to develop his mental and moral potential to the highest possible degree. But educationists, though they are concerned with the full development of the individual, also consider the relation of the individual to society. In the romance of friendship true friends therefore serve the society in which they live by offering an example for ordering all human relationships. They point the way to establishing the golden rule of ethics, which should regulate all interpersonal connections. Only if we recognise the public value of the Renaissance ideal of friendship – which has been replaced by modern substitutes such as fraternity or solidarity – can we appreciate its supreme educational significance. In his play Shakespeare creates an enthusiastic hero who shows himself so much impressed that, without hesitation, he literally imitates an act of heroic generosity by offering his bride to his friend. But his own circumstances fit those of his adopted model only in his own imagination: he disregards the fact that he has been cast or has cast himself in the role of the hero of a conflicting educational fiction, the love-questing knight. Shakespeare lets his action work up to a climax in which an act seen in one context as the supreme test of idealism must be judged from the other context as abject desertion of all ideal endeavour.

Structure and sources

The best way to understand how Shakespeare arrived at tying the knot just described is to discuss the structure of his play in relation to his sources.[1] Edmund Spenser created the poetically most important educational fiction of his time by building on the knight-in-quest story, but Shakespeare started out by drawing on the tale of 'Felix and Felismena', a story-insert in Montemayor's pastoral novel *Diana*,[2] told for the greater part by the heroine herself. The story begins with a prelude

[1] Geoffrey Bullough prints as relating to *The Two Gentlemen*: the 'Titus and Gisippus' story from Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Governour* (1531), Book II, chapter xii, which retells Boccaccio's tale of 'Tito and Gisippo' (*Decamerone*, x, 8), the story of 'Felix and Felismena' from J. de Montemayor's *Diana*, excerpts from John Lyly's *Euphues* and from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, a scenario of Flaminio Scala's *Flavio Tradito* and excerpts from the German play *Julio and Hyppolita*, a text used by English actors in Germany and published in 1620 (Bullough, I, 203–66). Added to these must be Arthur Brooke's poem *Romeus and Juliet* (1562), reprinted by Bullough in the section related to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (I, 284–363); a newly edited text of substantial parts is found in G. Blakemore Evans (ed.), *Rom.*, 1984, pp. 213–47.

[2] For a close study of these correspondences see T. P. Harrison Jr, 'Shakespeare and Montemayor's *Diana*', *Texas University Studies in English* 5 and 6 (1925–6), 72–120.

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in which competing supernatural powers foreordain that she will be unhappy in love but endowed with a special gift of fortitude. Having grown up, the lady finds herself insistently and elaborately courted by the son of a high-ranking neighbour. Being conscious of what fate has decreed for her, she is reluctant to fall in love. At length her suitor succeeds in bribing her maid to give her his letter. Shakespeare's 1.2 closely imitates its counterpart in the novella, except for the fact that Julia shows herself much less reluctant to accept her suitor since she lacks Felismena's motivation. Her letter, which Proteus reads in 1.3, is much more binding than the answer Felismena sends to her Don Felix, who only succeeds in winning her love by continuing his ostentatious courtship for about another year. When Felismena has finally committed herself, the father of Don Felix intervenes by sending him to a foreign court on the pretext that he should carry out some business there. When Don Felix sets out, his broken heart does not allow him to take leave of his beloved, but Felismena, being doubtful about his constancy immediately follows him in the guise of a page. On her arrival she finds him already fallen in love with the lady Celia, and she overhears him courting her with a nightly serenade. For his play Shakespeare shortened the time of Proteus's courtship and substituted his avowal on the occasion of his leave-taking. He also changed the motivation of the father for sending his son to a place far from home and, in so doing, stressed the theme of education. Furthermore, he lengthened the stretch of time between Proteus's departure and Julia's resolution to follow him. But in spite of her greater trust Julia fares as badly as Felismena. Both manage to get employment from their faithless lovers, both reason with them and are subjected to the ignominy of being sent on errands to their rivals. Within these parallels, however, we find significant differences: Felismena, reasoning in disguise with her former lover, wins his full consent and yet finds him unable to change his intentions. Presumably, this is to be ascribed to her foreordained unhappiness in love, which relieves the unfaithful lover, at least partly, of the burden of personal guilt for his faithlessness. In this situation, out of pity for the suffering caused by his unsuccessful suit, Felismena tries to induce Celia to show him some favour. Celia, who has fallen in love with the disguised Felismena, at first complies with her wishes. But this creates more grief – not only for Felismena but for Celia, too, who must see the page's attempts to help his master as the rejection of her own love for him. Felismena is caught in a double bind in which every move can only engender new suffering. Felismena suffers most – out of pity for Felix when he yearned for tokens of Celia's love and for her own sake when he seemed to receive them. The only way out is opened by the death of Celia, while Felismena survives, presumably because of her special endowment of fortitude. Felix despairingly absconds. Felismena follows in search of him, roaming the world, and, becoming an Amazon, uses her fortitude to rescue many from mortal dangers. One of those so helped turns out to be her beloved Felix. Their reunion takes place far from courts and cities in a sort of green world. There is hope that they will be united. But the full flowering of their reunion still depends on the suspension of the supernatural decree which ordained that she should be unhappy in love.

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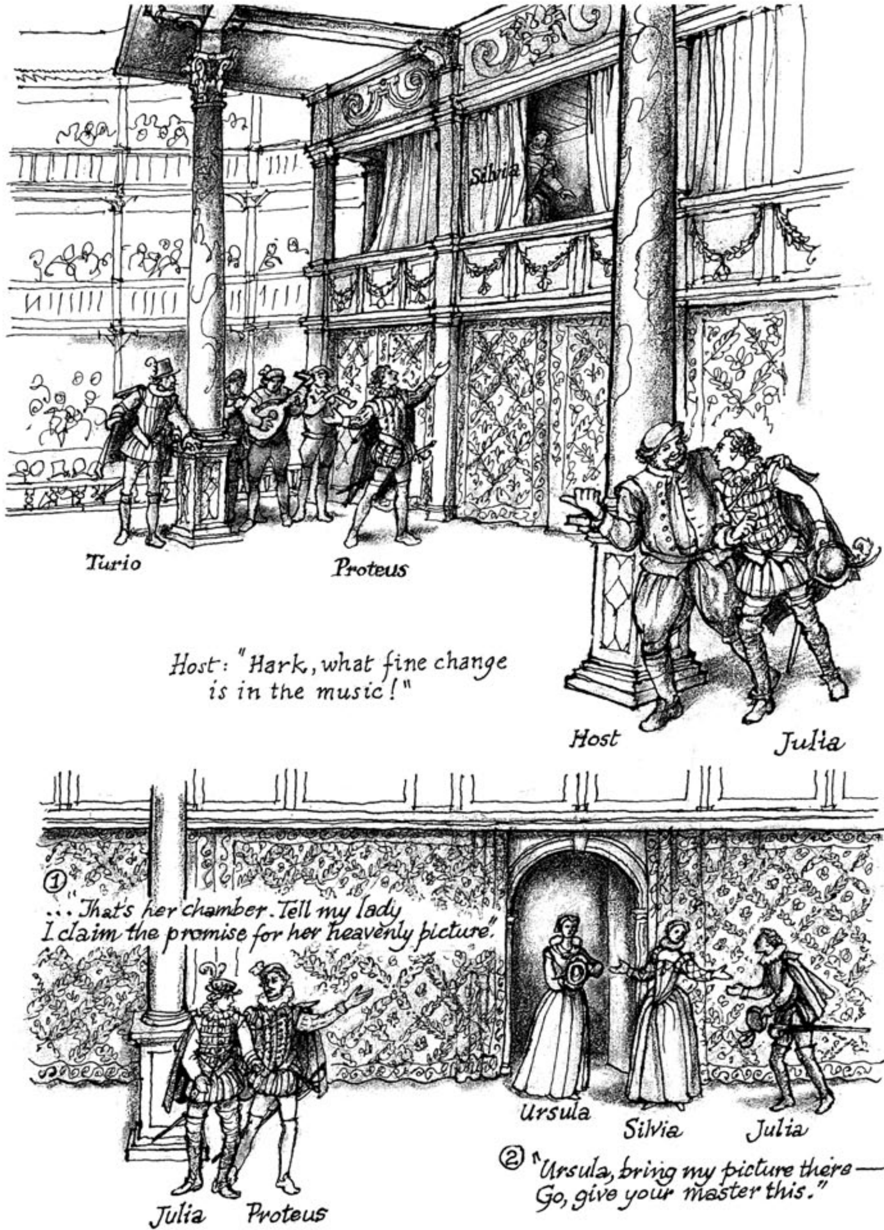

1 Possible ways of staging Silvia's chamber, by C. Walter Hodges. The design for Act 4, Scene 2 locates the chamber on an upper level of the stage; the design below shows two successive moments of Act 4, Scene 4 simultaneously: (1) the internal stage direction 'That's her chamber' and (2) the handing over of the picture, which necessitates Julia and Silvia meeting on the same level. See the notes on the locations at pp. 125 and 133 below

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Since Silvia, Celia's counterpart, is firmly pledged to Valentine, she neither accepts the advances of Proteus nor falls in love with the page he employs on his errands. For the favours shown by Celia to Don Felix, the dramatist substituted the motif of the begged-for portrait. Julia's sufferings are focused in her tale of having impersonated Ariadne, the mythical prototype of the woman abandoned by a faithless lover. Julia shows more sense and a clearer determination than Felismena to further her own interest. She is determined to use the advantage of her disguise to cross the suit of her deviant lover to her rival. To reach her ends she even feels inclined to reveal herself to Silvia for what she is, but abstains when this does not prove necessary. Neither Celia's death nor Silvia's firm rejection of Proteus solves the fixation of the lovers. In the end Julia's quest surprisingly succeeds through her own initiative far from the court in an area roughly corresponding to that of the source. We must conclude, then, that the plot of the Felix-and-Felismena novella offered Shakespeare a love-quest story in which the normal roles of the male and the female were reversed. He even strengthened these traits by shortening the period of Julia's reluctance to accept her lover's suit and by making her more determined in the pursuit of her aims. He also added a scene of leave-taking (2.2), in which Julia tries to secure her lover by initiating a betrothal that Proteus seems not to have foreseen, however eagerly he enters into the bond offered him.

In accordance with the fashion of double plots, Shakespeare then found, or rather invented, a love-quest story to mirror the earlier one. At first sight the Valentine–Silvia plot seems to be the less original version in so far as it is the male who is sent on the quest. But, as a quest-hero, Valentine shows considerably more lyrical than epic or dramatic qualities. The best one can say of him is that his good intentions can never be doubted. His lack of interest in love creates a parallel to Julia's initial reluctance. On meeting Silvia, he falls in love but remains strangely passive. According to his page, he spends his time oafishly gazing at her and displaying all the signs of the conventional lover. And it is by her initiative to make him write a letter for her to himself that the decisive connection between the lover and his lady is brought about (2.1). Even this stratagem would have failed without the servant's explanation of its significance. When we next see Valentine (2.4), he is involved in a skirmish of words with a rival who has little chance to supplant him except for the fact that he is favoured by the lady's father. The father's opposition is so formidable that the lovers choose to evade it rather than to overcome it. A plan for an elopement is made. We are not told who initiated it, but we must think it likely that most of it goes back to Silvia. It involves climbing her tower by means of a rope-ladder. This seems to have been thrown in to give Valentine some semblance of a romantic hero and as an instrument by which he can be found out. The execution of the plan is foiled partly because he blabs it out to his former companion – who in rivalry reveals it to Silvia's father – and partly because the hero walks blindly into a trap the father has set for him. When the culprit is convicted on the evidence of the ladder and a quite unnecessary poetic missive to his bride, the petty domestic tyrant misuses his powers as a territorial ruler by

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banishing him. On his way home he has the good fortune to fall into the hands of a band of outlaws who abstain from robbing him of the little he owns and elect him to be their leader, putting all their treasures at his disposal. Instead of energetically using this power now to further his own aims, he spends his time in sighing for Silvia and in improving the morality of his men. When Silvia has followed him into the forest and he also has the good fortune to gain control over his two rivals and the opposing father, he exerts himself so far as to save the longed-for bride from being raped but, soon after, shows himself ready to give away the coveted prize in order to emulate the antique model of ideal friendship. This remains an empty gesture since through Julia's intervention neither Silvia, the prize, nor the potential prizewinner Proteus is given the chance to accept or to reject the offer. The happy ending is then completed by the Duke, who declares that, contrary to his former judgement, the hero must be thought worthy to fulfil the ideal of the perfect gentleman as laid down in his earlier definition. Thus most of the hero's success in his quest does not depend on his own decisions and actions but is given to him by chance and his lady's goodwill and initiative. This parallel plot, therefore, does not only mirror the first with significant differences; it also offers a burlesque of that type of quest story which served as the vehicle in Spenser's educational fiction.

In combining his parallel plots, Shakespeare used the already-mentioned test-of-friendship motif. This derives from Boccaccio's novella 'Titus and Gisippus', which we find retold in Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Governour*, the leading treatise on education in Tudor times.[1] In this tale Boccaccio combined the two tests of heroic friendship which world literature had developed: the giving away of one's bride to one's friend and the giving of one's life for the sake of a friend. The latter motif appears singly in stories of the Damon-and-Pythias type or in the Orestes–Pylades myth. In the wonderfully apt tripartite structure of Boccaccio's tale, however, Titus's risking his life is used as the final proof that he worthily received the bride whom Gisippus had earlier ceded to him in testimony of his friendship. The gift of the bride is presented as a case to be argued for and against. It meets with opposition from the bride and her family but is publicly defended by both friends. The Roman Titus is made to win his argument against the Greek relatives of his bride, presumably because the Romans understood the lore of friendship better than the Greeks. As if to forestall feminist criticism, the author has the story told by a female narrator, whose approval is shared by the female as well as the male listeners among her audience. It is surely important that the action takes place in the days of classical antiquity, when the relations between men and women had not been influenced either by ideas of courtly love or by Platonic and neo-Platonic reinterpretations of it. Elyot's version of the story keeps the antique setting but eliminates the argumentative elements, probably because he could not imagine that any of his readers might be tempted to prove their mettle by literally imitating the marvellous test of friendship his story tells about.

[1] See Ralph M. Sargent, 'Sir Thomas Elyot and the integrity of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*', *PMLA* 65 (1950), 1166–80.

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