CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

The Two Gentlemen of Verona

William Shakespeare · *c. 1590 · original English text*

Two friends, Valentine and Proteus, leave Verona on different errands of love and service. Proteus abandons Julia, betrays Valentine, and pursues Silvia. Shakespeare's early comedy has a song everyone knows—and a last scene in a forest that has always been hard to stage and harder to praise without a caveat.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is a gentleman's friendship worth if it can be sold for a new love, and can a play's last pardon heal a betrayal this complete?

"I cannot leave to love, and yet I do; But there I leave to love where I should love."

Proteus · Act II, as he talks himself into forsaking Julia

Valentine is loyal, then an outlaw, then—in the last scene—so eager to prove friendship that he offers Silvia to the man who has just attempted her. Julia, disguised as a page, has seen the whole unfaithfulness. The play asks for repentance and a double wedding, and many readers have found the offer, and the speed of the pardon, worse than the earlier jokes. Teach the song, the disguises, and Lance's dog honestly, and do not skip or smooth the forest scene. A gentleman is measured by whether his word holds when desire turns.

KEY CHARACTERS

Valentine
The loyal friend, later an outlaw, whose last generosity has always been controversial.

Proteus
The inconstant friend, who betrays both Julia and Valentine for Silvia.

Julia
Proteus's first love, who follows him in a page's disguise and sees everything.

Silvia
The Duke's daughter, constant to Valentine and clear-eyed about Proteus.

Lance (and Crab)
The servant and his dog, a comic fidelity the gentlemen do not match.

WHERE I SHOULD LOVE

> *"I cannot leave to love, and yet I do; But there I leave to love where I should love."*
> **Proteus** · Act II

> *"Who is Silvia? What is she, That all our swains commend her?"*
> **Proteus (song)** · Act IV

Grades 9–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

Verona, and a Parting

ACT I

Valentine goes to the Emperor's court. Proteus stays for Julia, then is sent after him by his father. Rings and letters already begin to go astray.

- The opening contrast is staid friendship against a first love.
- Julia's tearing of the letter is a young woman's pride, not indifference.
- Speed's jokes set a comic pace the later acts will have to carry.

02

Milan, and a Turn

ACT II

Valentine loves Silvia and would elope. Proteus arrives, forgets Julia, and tells the Duke of the elopement. Valentine is banished.

- Proteus names his own shame and does the deed anyway.
- The betrayal is a choice, not a spell.
- Silvia is constant; the inconstancy is the friend's.

> *"I cannot leave to love, and yet I do; But there I leave to love where I should love."*
> **Proteus** · Act II

03

A Page, and a Song

ACTS III–IV

Julia follows, disguised as a page, and is sent by Proteus to woo Silvia for him. Silvia refuses him. The song 'Who is Silvia?' is sung at her window.

- The song is lovely and is also a tool in a false courtship.
- Julia has to carry the love-tokens of her own betrayal.
- Silvia's refusal is the play's clearest moral speech before the forest.

04

Outlaws, and a Forest

ACTS IV–V

Valentine becomes a captain of outlaws. Silvia flees toward him, is seized, and is rescued. Proteus's force and Valentine's intervention bring all four lovers into one clearing.

- The outlaw plot is early-romance furniture.
- Proteus's attempt on Silvia is a serious assault; name it as a wrong, without graphic staging in class.
- Julia is still unnamed, still watching.

05

An Offer, and a Pardon

ACT V, THE CLOSE

Proteus begs pardon. Valentine, to prove friendship, offers him Silvia. Julia faints and is known. The Duke relents; marriages are promised. Lance and Crab have, all along, been the more faithful pair.

- 'Take thou thy Silvia, for thou hast deserved her' is the Duke to Valentine; the harder offer is Valentine's own to Proteus.
- The speed of forgiveness has troubled readers for centuries. Let students feel the trouble.
- Do not invent a later explanation that lets Valentine off; stay with what the scene does.

Friendship and Betrayal · Constancy · Disguise · A Hard Pardon · Words and Vows

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #1509, an early comedy in five acts.
2. Exact: "I cannot leave to love, and yet I do; / But there I leave to love where I should love." The song begins "Who is Silvia? What is she, / That all our swains commend her?" The Duke says to Valentine, "Take thou thy Silvia, for thou hast deserved her."
3. The last forest scene includes Proteus's attempt on Silvia and Valentine's offer to give her to him. Treat that sequence as a moral problem, not as a light close. It is not for the youngest readers without a careful frame.
4. Julia's disguise and Lance's scenes are the play's other life: fidelity in comic clothes. They help, but they do not erase the last scene.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1509, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-two-gentlemen-of-verona/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.