

PART TWO

*1593–1594: the print author presents himself*  
*Play scene: “Two Gentlemen” to “Richard III”*

In 1593 and 1594, while the theatres were closed in London due to plague, Richard Field, from Stratford-upon-Avon, served as the printer of both *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. The choice of this printer for Shakespeare's first published poems contributes an intriguing dimension to the story about the national poet-playwright. For, as Colin Burrow observes, “Field's shop produced books which . . . made claims to high literary status,” such as John Harington's translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1591), yet “there is a striking lack of theatrical texts among the works he printed” (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 6). Evidently, the printer's trade could participate in the kind of generic exclusivity that such authors as the print-poet Spenser exhibited, when he eschewed the new commercial theatre for the “high literary status” of the Virgilian pastoral *Shepheardes Calender*, printed by Hugh Singleton in 1579, or the epic *Faerie Queene*, published by William Ponsonby in 1590. Field's profile as a printer ends up mirroring Shakespeare's profile as an author, for, as is well known, in both *Venus* and *Lucrece* Shakespeare turns from the world of staged theatre to that of printed poetry. But the counter-Spenserian profile sharpens because, as Burrow adds, Field “was also an appropriate printer for an Ovidian poem,” having inherited his shop from Thomas Vautrollier, who “had enjoyed a monopoly in the printing of Ovid in Latin.” More than this, for back in 1589 Field had printed Vautrollier's text of the *Metamorphoses* and would go on in 1594 to reprint Vautrollier's edition of the *Heroides* (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 6). Effectively, with Field as his printer, Shakespeare extends his Elizabethan reputation as the stager of plays to present himself as a print author of Ovidian poems.

We need to see Shakespeare extending this Ovidian persona from stage to page, rather than simply inaugurating it for the purpose of print, because this is what is attested to by those of his plays authored and performed before the closing of the theatres, none of which came into print until after the theatres reopened (insofar as we can tell). While the exact composition

and performance chronology of these plays remains unknown, most scholars would consent to the list from *The Oxford Shakespeare*, even if they might quarrel about some of its details:

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

*The Taming of the Shrew*

2 *Henry VI (The First Part of the Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster)*

3 *Henry VI (The true Tragedy of Richard Duke of York and the Good King Henry the Sixth)*

*The Most Lamentable Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*

1 *Henry VI*

*Richard III.*<sup>1</sup>

Such a list is convenient for showing the young Shakespeare overgoing the tragicomic Marlowe by ranging widely through the three available dramatic genres advertised years later on the title page to the First Folio: comedy, history, and tragedy. Already, the young Shakespeare is a formidable practitioner of dramatic form, in ways that Marlowe would never live to be. For purposes of the present discussion, therefore, it will be convenient to group *Two Gentlemen* and *Shrew* together as early comedies, the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard* as early histories, and *Titus* as an early tragedy.

These three sets of plays all require detailed analysis beyond the scope of this book, but it might be useful to suggest briefly that the main frame of Shakespeare's art, as discussed in chapters 1–2, does not suddenly appear in *Venus* and *Lucrece*. Most of the early comedies, histories, and tragedies show an engagement with the Ovidian art of poetry and theatre in a Virgilian landscape; the frame is almost always inflected with the aesthetics of Spenser and Marlowe. Obviously, a comedy like *Two Gentleman* accomplishes this inflection differently than a history play like 3 *Henry VI*, and both differ from a historical tragedy like *Titus*.

While only a full analysis could do justice to the complexities involved, we might remind ourselves that *Two Gentlemen* and *Shrew* have clear affinities with *Venus*, especially in their interest in Ovidian myths of authorship (including Orpheus), but also in their engagement with the works of Spenser and Marlowe. Similarly, *Titus* has clear links with *Lucrece*; not simply were both the play and the poem published in 1594, but the stage tragedy refers to the Lucretia myth several times, and the two works share

<sup>1</sup> Some editors would include *The Comedy of Errors* in this pre-plague group (see, e.g., *Riverside*), but the anomaly of this play has already been noted, and thus it proves convenient to put it aside here. Other scholars, such as Bate, would date *Titus* after the plague years (Bate, ed., *Titus Andronicus*, 3, 72, esp. 77–79), but the precise chronology is not necessary to the present argument.

important references to the Ovidian and Spenserian myth of the nightingale Philomela.<sup>2</sup> The intertextual system is more complex than this suggests, however, because the delightful romantic comedy in *Two Gentlemen* toys darkly with tragedy and rape, naturally embedding several references to Philomela, while *Shrew* refers to both Philomela and Lucrece. As a group, the early plays record some splendid generic disjunctions, as when Charles the Dolphin in 1 *Henry VI* tells Joan de Pucelle that her “promises are like Adonis’ garden” (1. 6. 6) – forcing an uneasy alliance between the history play and Shakespeare’s first narrative poem, not to mention Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, 3. 6, which the play clearly evokes (*Riverside*, 640). Less surprisingly, the epic landscape at Troy, with Sinon at its center, shows up importantly in 3 *Henry VI* (3. 2. 188–95), as in *Lucrece*.

Accordingly, the *Henry VI* trilogy does not simply refer to the Virgilian story of Aeneas and Dido (2 *Henry VI*, 3. 2. 116–18, 5. 2. 62–64); it showcases the sovereign as a Spenserian shepherd-king. This figure is playfully satirized in Christopher Sly during the Induction scenes to *Shrew*, a play that also alludes comically to Virgil’s national epic and probably to Marlowe’s burlesque staging of it in *Dido, Queen of Carthage*: “As Anna to the Queen of Carthage was, / Tranio,” declares Lucentio, “I burn, I pine, I perish” (1. 1. 154–55). In particular, *Two Gentlemen*, *Titus*, and *Shrew* are clearly plotted along the Virgilian path of epic court and pastoral countryside, in a narrative pattern that becomes important in the later comedies and romances, from *Love’s Labor’s Lost* through *The Tempest*.

In the early plays, versions of the poet-playwright figure include Proteus in *Two Gentlemen*, Tranio in *Shrew*, Titus in his tragedy, and most intriguingly Joan in 1 *Henry VI*, a shepherd’s daughter who claims to be the daughter of a king, as she herself insists: “Not me begotten of a shepherd swain, / But issued from the progeny of kings” (5. 4. 37–38). As mentioned in chapter 1, in *Richard III* Shakespeare tends to separate poet and playwright in the characters of Clarence and Richard. Nonetheless, in almost all of these plays, we discover a dramatic conflict between two figures whose aesthetics resemble those of Spenser and Marlowe, from Valentine and Proteus in *Two Gentlemen*, to Talbot and Joan in 1 *Henry VI*, to Lucius and Aaron in *Titus*. Without access to the Spenserian aesthetics of pastoral and epic and the Marlovian aesthetics of poetry and theatre, including their interpenetration, we cannot possibly account for a passage like the following, spoken by Shakespeare’s earliest shepherd-king figure, Henry VI:

<sup>2</sup> For recent analysis of *Lucrece* and *Titus*, see Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Political Culture*, ch. 3.

So flies the reckless shepherd from the wolf;  
 So first the harmless sheep doth yield his fleece,  
 And next his throat unto the butcher's knife.  
 What scene of death hath Roscius now to act?

(3 *Henry VI*, 5. 6. 7–10)

What makes this speech unusual and important is its artistically self-conscious yoking of two different forms of authorial discourse, typically separated in the literary tradition: that of the Spenserian pastoral shepherd; and that of the Marlovian theatrical man.<sup>3</sup>

Equally to the point, poetry and theatre are recurrent topics of conversation in all of these plays – and not simply in the comedies or more memorably *Titus*, with its formal tragicomic staging of the Ovidian “book”: “’tis Ovid’s Metamorphosis . . . / This is the tragic tale of Philomel” (4. 1. 41, 42–47). In fact, this scene is of considerable importance for Shakespeare’s career. When Lavinia “takes the staff in her mouth, and guides it with her stumps, and writes” the words “*Stuprum – Chiron – Demetrius*” (s.d. after l. 76 and l. 78) – Shakespeare doubly dramatizes a momentous conjunction and finally a historic transfer in literary and cultural media: from the printed book of Ovid’s poetry to the very Senecan-styled tragicomic theatre that he himself scripts, as revealed in Marcus’ subsequent reference to “the lustful sons of Tamora” as “Performers of this heinous, bloody deed” and in Titus’ own Latin quotation from Seneca’s *Hippolytus* (79–80).<sup>4</sup>

In the history plays, as perhaps more memorably in the comedies, characters repeatedly talk about poets and their art. If Proteus in *Two Gentlemen* can tell the Duke that “Orpheus’ lute was strung with poets’ sinews” (3. 2. 77), Clarence records his horrifying dream with like-minded reference: “I passed (methought) the melancholy flood, / With that sour ferryman which poets write of” (*Richard III*, 1. 4. 45–46). In contrast, Clarence’s vicious brother, Richard himself, can confide in the audience that he is putting theatre to work: “Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word” (3. 1. 82–83). The one Ovidian poem that so

<sup>3</sup> I have often thought that the present book and its sequel are an attempt to account for the peculiarity of this speech near the beginning of Shakespeare’s professional career. In chapter 1, we saw how both Spenser and Marlowe themselves bridge the two discourses, but Shakespeare here overgoes both in his technical reference to the theatre and its profession of acting.

<sup>4</sup> Barkan is on the verge of this idea when he finds here “a myth about the competition amongst media of communication,” which he initially generalizes as “words, pictures, book, signs, and more,” but then specifies as Shakespeare’s own theatre, “a new medium of communication . . . that marries the book and the picture” (*The Gods Made Flesh*, 246, 247): “But to this process Shakespeare adds more stages. First, Lavinia can point to the book, a compendium of words and pictures already made; second, she makes signs in the earth; finally, Shakespeare can embody the whole fable in a drama: words, pictures, book, signs, and more” (245).

historically crosses the divide between poetry and theatre, the *Heroides*, is quoted in comedy and history alike (*Shrew*, 3. 1. 28–29; 3 *Henry VI*, 1. 3. 48). Ovid himself is occasionally a topic of conversation, as in *Shrew* when Tranio tells Lucentio that they should not “As Ovid be an outcast quite abjur’d” (1. 1. 33). If this comedy opens with Ovid, *Two Gentlemen* opens with England’s Ovid, as Valentine and Proteus reveal that they have been reading the “love-book” of the great Elizabethan Ovidian minor epic, *Hero and Leander* – “some shallow story of deep love, / How young Leander cross’d the Hellespont” (1. 1. 21–22).<sup>5</sup>

All of this helps explain not simply why books are a recurrent topic of conversation in these plays (“this small packet of Greek and Latin books” [*Shrew*, 2. 1. 98]), but why books often end up conjoined with theatre – sometimes absolutely deftly, as in Queen Margaret’s superb “flattering index of a direful pageant” in *Richard III* (4. 4. 85). These plays, it turns out, are nearly as obsessed with publication and print culture as we shall see in *The Rape of Lucrece*. In *Two Gentlemen*, for instance, Proteus performs his falsifying part by relying on a term that has received considerable notice in the minor epic (chapter 4): “For love of you, not hate unto my friend, / Hath made me *publisher* of this pretense” (3. 1. 46–47; emphasis added). Consequently, the early plays show a remarkable commitment to the concepts of artistic immortality and national fame, and do so through the terms of print culture itself:

O peers of England, shameful is this league,  
 Fatal this marriage, cancelling your fame,  
 Blotting your names from books of memory,  
 Rasing the characters of your renown,  
 Defacing monuments of conquer’d France.

(2 *Henry VI*, 1. 1. 98–102)

Recalling some of these general contours in the early comedies, histories, and tragedies, we may turn now to Shakespeare’s two minor epics to see how the fledgling national poet-playwright manages the transposition from stage to page. This second part to the book thus consists of two respective chapters designed to explore the Shakespearean authorial frame in works in which he presents himself as a print poet, in competition with such nationally visible rivals as Spenser and Marlowe: chapter 3, on *Venus and Adonis*; and chapter 4, on *The Rape of Lucrece*.

<sup>5</sup> *Hero and Leander* was entered in the Stationers’ Register on 28 September 1593, but is believed to have circulated in manuscript; the first extant edition dates to 1598.

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