

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ROMEO AND JULIET . 1597 (First quarto)

Shakespeare

### OVERVIEW

Scholars and modern readers concur that the 'best' version of *Romeo and Juliet* is that which appeared in 1599, and which we call the Second Quarto. (Interested readers of Shakespeare inevitably attend to the quarto or folio version before them: for instance, the First Quarto, which appeared in 1597, is much shorter than later versions, omits many speeches that appear in later versions, and tolerates awkward transitions nowhere else to be found in versions of the play.) That the issues of text are no hindrance to the ongoing popularity of the present play, is obvious from the daily news. Crowds of tourists today surround the 'house of Juliet' and the 'walls over which Romeo climbed to find his love.' Movies, musicals, and high school classes testify to the lasting vigor of the play, in which the beauty of the tragedy of youthful love is replayed in young (and older) minds worldwide.

### CHARACTERS

*Romeo* Romeo is a scion of the Montagu family, raised with the Renaissance values of that hot blooded family-clan, which strutted over the power system of fifteenth century Verona—and whose implacable blood feud enemies, the Capulets, rivalled them at every step, for power, control, and macho superiority. Within this setting the teen age Romeo first comes into his manhood, desire pouring from his hormones, but other lusts, like blood feud violence, also circulating in his formative brain. It is in just this setting that he catches the disease called love at first sight, and falls for the beautiful fourteen year old daughter of his rival clan, the Capulets. His own death, and hers, will follow from the impossible situation in which this reckless love puts the two youngsters.

*Juliet* Juliet is the fourteen year old daughter of the Capulets, whose parents have destined her for a propitious marriage within the Capulet line, and for an appropriate role as procreator of a new generation of Montagu haters. She first meets Romeo at a masquerade ball held by her father, in effect a kind of coming out event for the young lady, plus an opportunity to introduce her to Count Paris, a Capulet and an ardent suitor for her hand. As it happens, however, the eye she catches, and falls in love with, is the masked figure of Romeo, one of the disguised and festive figures who have filtered into the ballroom. That fatal glance enralls both youngsters, and will lead them to their mutual downfall, in the midst of renewed bloodshed between their families.

*Friar Lawrence* There is much dispute about Shakespeare's attitude toward the religious values of his time. There is little doubt, though, that he embodies what he considers the highest human values—compassion, large scale vision, humanity, and human intelligence—in his frocked characters. Friar Lawrence is the only person who fully understands the tragedy impending upon Romeo and Juliet. But given the final outcome of the tragedy, do we feel that the friar was wise to make his initial intervention on behalf of the star crossed lovers?

*Capulet* Capulet, the father of Juliet, 'wants the best for his daughter,' which means the best for him, which means a prosperous marriage between the young woman and the rich, ardent Count Paris. Capulet wants peace in Verona, and is a supporter of the reigning Duke, who is all about law and order, and yet the refusal of Capulet to accept the initial marriage-refusal of Juliet is at the root of the civic violence which underlies this entire play.

## STORY

That the story is a natural, world wide material for dramatic hits, needs little arguing and that the story can hit the spot locally could not have been better proven than in Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, which made Americans thrill to their own lives even through reading themselves in the mirror of Spanish Harlem.

So fifteenth century Verona it is. A moderate prince attempts to keep peace in this prosperous city-state, but the gang warfare carried on against each other, by the two wealthy families of Montagu and Capulet, is ungovernable and ancient, and constantly pulls the city apart into violence. Our story opens on what might seem a propitious moment for the city, a banquet staged by the Capulets, to promote the coming out or availability of their fourteen year old—not an unusual marriage age—daughter, Juliet. If only, we groan in retrospect, the masked party going Montagus, who infiltrated the excitement, had not included one Romeo, whose wandering eye and heart fell on forbidden territory, the very Juliet whose future was up for sale that night.

Romeo not only spots Juliet, but finds her, in the midst of the dance and revelry, irresistibly beautiful. He flirts with her—he in masquerade, of course, but inevitably identified by his voice—and kisses her twice, a conspicuous move that is soon on everyone's lips. By the ball's end he has arranged a meeting with Juliet—and before long, in the headlong course of their passion, Juliet has come to realize the consequences of the few initial steps that she and Romeo have taken. She has put herself in the position of countering the wishes of her father, who will soon be enraged at what is occurring, but she will also be converting herself to Romeo—both by word and in her heart—more deeply that she can afford—unless of course she wins his promises that his desire for her is directed toward marriage.

So strong are the feelings involved, on both sides, that the two lovers agree to meet at the chapel of a kindly but seasoned friar, Friar Lawrence, who comforts, consoles, and finally performs their wedding ceremony. The remainder of the play is predictably disastrous. Capulet of course finds out, and his rage is fatal; but before that Romeo and certain gang friends of his from the Montagu team, put the plan, which he has made with Juliet for elopement, in deadly jeopardy. In a street fight Romeo encounters and kills a certain Tybalt, a Capulet and cousin of Juliet. The prince of Verona, outraged by the murder and the general civic disorder, banishes Romeo, who is forced to flee to Mantua.

By a series of hush hush communications, Romeo and Juliet arrange—through Friar Lawrence who is also an apothecary—a plan by which Juliet can take a sleeping powder from which she will awake in a few days, after, on the assumption of her death, having escaped the demand of her father that she should be married to Count Paris. It is expected that she will join and flee with Romeo, upon her waking, but alas she finds the returned Romeo dead, having killed himself upon finding her seemingly lifeless body. She kills herself at this discovery. And all for the price of a few kisses at a masquerade ball!

## THEMES

*Passion* The passion of Romeo and Juliet for one another seems to fit with the passionate civic climate which rages in the streets of Verona. (Many critics have observed that the behavior of the Italians, in this play, conforms to the assumptions of the Elizabethan playgoers about the national characteristics of their neighbors to the East.) The lovers' passion, evolutionary and hormonal as it is, is not without capacity for intricate subterfuge and lovers' planning, while the social passions, unleashed in violence, seems to pour upward from primitive clan drives.

*Violence* The violence in question spreads through the city of Verona, and evidently infects such elite social sectors as those that include Mercutio, Romeo, Tybalt...the seemingly leading scions of the most prominent citizens of the city. To find Romeo taking lethal poison and Juliet stabbing herself to death, seems only part of the culture we are meeting. Our own youth and drug culture reflects a similar anomie and value-lack, and inflicts the same punishments Verona was ready to dispense.

**Hatred** Hatred, of course, is the trigger of much of the violence that pervades *Romeo and Juliet*. The mutual hatred of Capulets and Montagus lies deep in Capulet himself, and even in Romeo, who though swept off his feet by a Capulet, cannot translate this experience into a sense of love for his beloved's clan.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **Romeo**

**Character** Romeo is an impassioned teen ager, born into privilege and into an exclusive, vindictive clan. But he is susceptible, as human beings are, to beauty wherever he finds it, especially to beauty which advertises the wonders of reproduction. He throws himself on Friar Lawrence, in his search for any kind of shelter for his new love, but he has no sense of the dilemmas the Friar is enduring, in endeavoring to guide his desperate young friends. In the end even Friar Lawrence's efforts are not enough to defeat destiny, the destiny of the mistimed pharmaceutical, which leads first Romeo and then Juliet to death.

**Parallels.** The mind drifts back to Jason and Medea, forward to Tom Sawyer and Becky Sharp or to the middle aged academic with Lolita, in Nabokov's classic, *Lolita*. And never to forget Werther, as self-doomed as Romeo. From the world of entertainment seep in memories of the ingenu Justin Bieber, a kid from Canada with a gift for audio self-promotion, who is overnight the dream boy of millions of sweet listening cuties. And in the background, to all these memories, can't you hear the soundtrack to 'Young Love,' the love death anthem of your own once awakening sexuality?

### **Illustrative moments**

**Confessional** In his first appearances with Benvolio, Romeo betrays his lovelorn dejection, but is reluctant, and more, to let on to his kinsman what the real cause is. Juliet has just begun to preoccupy the young lover's imagination.

**Flirtatious.** At Capulet's ball, Romeo (in masquerade) flirts and kisses with young Juliet, who picks up on his vibes. They rapidly magnetize onto one another, and the rest is history.

**Adoring** In his iambic love paeans to Julie, as she appears at her balcony, Romeo exceeds English:

'O speak again bright angel, for thou art  
As glorious to this night...  
As is a winged messenger of heaven...'

**Desperate** Romeo is crazed, finally, at the thought that he will be banished from Verona.

'There is no world without Verona walls  
But purgatory, torture, hell itself...

### **Juliet**

**Character.** Juliet, though only fourteen, is a lovely young lady, fully qualified for marriage, in the terms of Renaissance Italy. From her heart we hear an outpouring of passion and complex feeling, as in the nature-metaphor laced speech by which she urges Romeo not to hasten on his way to Mantua (Act 3, Scene 5). It is Shakespeare's genius to put into Juliet's mouth a language of high poetry, which would discord sharply with any naturalistic expectations. It is in 'her' transformative nature that she rises above the clan-hostilities and parental objections, which embed her, to love Romeo as pure spirit.

**Parallels** Great loves—Antony and Cleopatra; Paris and Helen; Odysseus and Penelope; Elizabeth Bennett and d'Arcy—history myth and fiction in a single potpourri of passions—surge to meet the instance of Juliet and Romeo, but no case quite fits them like Francesca and Paolo, in Dante's *Divine*

*Comedy*, two young lovers lured by the delights of reading together, lured into a tragic moment of passion, a moment for which even the compassionate Dante reluctantly reserves the sin of lust.

### **Illustrative moments**

*Adoring* For Juliet, no expression of her love for Romeo is exaggerated; all she can say is right on and deep.

'My bounty is as boundless as the sea,  
My love as deep...'

*Intricate* 'Parting is such sweet sorrow.' Juliet is exact in the presentation of her emotions toward Romeo. She parses the details of feeling.

*Philosophical* A fourteen year old's version of Immanuel Kant!

'Conceit, more rich in matter than in words,  
Brag of his substance, not of ornament.'

*Poetic* This Juliet leaps over time into our memories of the child poet brilliance of Minou Drouet, who set the poetic world on fire with her prodigy poems in the middle of the twentieth century.

'Come, civil night  
Thou sober suited matron all in black...'

### **Discussion questions**

Shakespeare puts complex, adult language into the speeches of Romeo and Juliet. Do you find this device convincing, or do you feel an unpleasant discord between these speeches and the age and status of the speakers?

Romeo and Juliet are star crossed lovers, for sure, but they are also pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of cultural history. Is Shakespeare more interested in the love affair of the two youngsters, or in the violent city-state gang warfare that embraces them? If your answer is 'both,' how does Shakespeare manage to bring the two elements together?

Does Friar Lawrence, as Shakespeare depicts him, show good judgment in marrying Romeo and Juliet, or, given the outcome of this action, should the Friar, like Juliet's nurse, have concluded that it is best to reject the romantic desires of the lovers?