

Into the Literature

CREATING CONTEXT

"Shakespeare and the Elizabethans"

The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet

Romeo and Juliet is one of Shakespeare's three most popular plays, along with *Hamlet* and *Richard III*. It has romance, sword fights, comedy, and tragic death—everything an Elizabethan or modern audience could ask for. In the centuries following its first production, the play has inspired paintings, operas, ballets, and other plays. It was the basis of the Broadway musical and later the movie *West Side Story*, in which the two feuding families are represented by Latino and Anglo gangs in New York City.

At the time Shakespeare decided to write *Romeo and Juliet*, one of his friends was the Earl of Southampton. Southampton, in turn, was close friends with his neighbors, Sir Charles and Sir Henry Danvers. The Danvers brothers were fiery swordsmen, and their family was involved in a feud with a family named Long. One night the Danvers brothers and their followers broke into the Long family's house and started a fight. After Henry Danvers killed Henry Long, Shakespeare's friend Southampton hid the Danvers brothers and helped them get away.

The Danvers family feud has many similarities to the feud in *Romeo and Juliet*. The love story in the play came from a poem by Arthur Brooke titled "The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet." One character who did not appear in Brooke's version of the story is Mercutio. This wild and quarrelsome but faithful friend of Romeo's is one of Shakespeare's most appealing characters. He may have been based on Shakespeare's close friend Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe, another great Elizabethan playwright, was killed in a fight in a tavern.

Most of Shakespeare's plays can be traced in this way to various literary sources and to incidents in his life and in the world around him. He drew from everything he knew to create the rich, colorful, and truthful pictures of life found in his work. His language, his sense of theater, and his insight into human nature—these are the qualities that make his plays great.

Shakespeare's Sources

Shakespeare learned the story of Romeo and Juliet from a poem by Arthur Brooke (d. 1563), who had been inspired by a tale by an Italian writer, Matteo Bandello (1485–1561). As critic Northrop Frye reminds us in *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, "The original writer is not the writer who thinks up a new story—there aren't any new stories, really—but the writer who tells one of the world's great stories in a new way." The story probably originated in Roman times and has always been set in Italy. Shakespeare would not have thought it necessary to visit Verona or to research Italian customs in order to stage his play—these are requirements of 20th-century audiences.

Theater in the Elizabethan Age

Plays were a major form of popular entertainment in Shakespeare's time, attracting all kinds of people, who played an active role in the performances. Elizabethan audiences cheered, hissed, and sometimes threw rotten eggs and vegetables on the stage. Playwrights had to give the people plenty of excitement and laughs and romance, with stabbings, ghosts, and sword fights to please the audience. The Globe, the theater where most of Shakespeare's plays were performed, was three stories high. It was octagon-shaped with an open-air court in the center. The stage reached out into this central area and was surrounded by tiers of seats that had a roof over them. The middle- and upper-class members of the audience sat in the covered seats. People who were too poor to buy seats paid one penny to stand in the uncovered courtyard. In those days, women were not allowed to act in plays, so all the female roles were played by young male actors. Shakespeare liked to have fun with this convention by having the female characters in his comedies dress up as boys, so that there were boys playing women pretending to be boys. When *Romeo and Juliet* was first performed, the part of Juliet was played by a young man.

Shakespeare in London

When Shakespeare arrived in London, Elizabeth I was on the throne. During her reign, from 1558 to 1603, now called the Elizabethan Age, literature and theater thrived. The young Shakespeare could not have chosen a better time to make his mark. He first entered the theater as an actor, traveling with touring companies from town to town, acting mostly in public buildings, in the open air, or in the back rooms of inns. However, by the time he was 27, he had begun to find success as a playwright. Shortly thereafter, the theaters of London were closed for almost two years because of the plague. People were afraid to get together in public places, where they might catch the fatal disease. The theaters did not reopen until 1594. Shakespeare continued to spend most of his time in London until 1610, when he retired from the theater at 46 years old, to live the life of a gentleman in Stratford.

Shakespeare's Life

1564–1616

Even though William Shakespeare is probably the most famous writer who ever lived, we know surprisingly few facts about him. He was born in Stratford-on-Avon, a small town less than a hundred miles northwest of London, probably on April 23. Shakespeare's family was middle-class. His father was a glove maker who later became mayor of the town. His mother was a distant relative of a wealthy family who lived not far from Stratford.

Scholars assume that Shakespeare went to a local grammar school, as was the custom for middle-class youth. There he probably studied Latin and read works by ancient Roman writers. This was the extent of his formal education. At age eighteen he married Anne Hathaway, a local woman seven or eight years older than he. They had a daughter in 1583 and twins—a boy and a girl—in 1585.

Sometime after the birth of the twins, Shakespeare moved to London, apparently without his family. There are no records of what he did during the next seven years. However, by 1592, he was one of the most successful playwrights in London. By 1596, the year that *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* was first performed, ten of his plays had been produced in London.

By this time Shakespeare was part owner of an acting group called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men in 1603 when James I of England became its patron. At that time, acting troupes were a business; their members shared the profits they made in producing plays. Shakespeare was a good businessman as well as a master dramatist. He owned shares in the Globe Theatre, where most of his plays were first performed. From his business interests and plays, he made a good deal of money.

From 1592 to 1594, London suffered outbreaks of the plague. As a result, theaters were closed during most of this period. Since there was no market for plays, Shakespeare used this time to write poetry. His first long poem, *Venus and Adonis*, was published in 1593, and others were published soon after.

Shakespeare resumed writing plays in 1594 and continued until 1613. His success enabled him to buy a beautiful home in Stratford, and, about five years before his death, he retired there to live with his family. By then he possessed a coat of arms and lived as a gentleman. While there are no records of his death, the monument that marks his grave at Holy Trinity Church suggests he died in April 1616.



The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet

BACKGROUND

Who Were the Elizabethans?

The people of Shakespeare's day, living under the rule of Elizabeth I, were a mixed group. Some were descended from the original people of Britain, called "Celts," who now survive mainly in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Some were descended from the Romans who occupied England in the years before A.D. 399. Some had Viking ancestors (the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) who sailed from Northern Europe, and some were derived from the Norman French who arrived in 1066 under William the Conqueror. Elizabeth ruled a diverse population that had lived together for over 500 years and was developing the language that we speak today.

Shakespeare and the Globe Theatre

Until past the mid-1500s, plays were performed wherever the actors could find an audience—in bear-baiting arenas or on makeshift platforms. Then, in 1576, James Burbage built a structure called The Theatre in a field outside London. It was the first building in England designed specifically for the presentation of plays. Soon several theaters were competing for audiences. One of the most famous was the Globe Theatre, built in 1598. Most of Shakespeare's plays were

performed there, for Shakespeare was one of its owners and an actor in its company, the King's Men. The Globe Theatre had no roof and very few seats, but it could accommodate almost 2,000 people, since most of them stood in the yard that surrounded the stage. This area was called the *pit*, and the people who stood to watch the play were called *groundlings*, who paid a penny apiece. The Globe Theatre was destroyed by fire in 1613.

William Shakespeare, Wordsmith

Shakespeare makes great use of figurative language and imagery, particularly light images, throughout *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Watch for references to the sun, the moon, the stars, shadows, and other representations of light and dark.

Love at First Sight

In many of his plays, Shakespeare's characters fall in love at first sight: Orlando loves Rosalind instantly in *As You Like It*; in *Measure for Measure*, when Claudio meets Isabella, he loses his heart to her. However, these are not all happy plays, and falling in love is not always a welcome event: Much of the plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* is about reluctant lovers. In the tradition of courtly love, a man might be hit with Cupid's

arrow just when he is feeling whole and free. Once struck by love, he is wounded and enslaved to the God of Love—depicted as childish, jealous, and blind.

Vexing Verse

Most of this play is written in blank verse, a form of poetry in unrhyming lines that sounds similar to everyday speech. Sometimes a line of poetry is split between two characters. When this happens, you will notice a large indent in the second character's line. Because this tale of "star-crossed lovers" was intended to be spoken aloud, reading it aloud may be the best way to get the meaning from the written words.

Also the play includes many Elizabethan expressions, some of which are mild swear words, like *zounds*, a shortened form of "by God's wounds," and *marry*, a shortened form of "by the Virgin Mary." Some words are no longer used as they were, such as *soft*, meaning "wait a minute," and *an*, meaning "if."





Act One

LITERARY CONCEPT

Foil

A **foil** is a character whose qualities contrast with those of another character. A writer might use a foil to emphasize or de-emphasize another character's traits. How does Mercutio (in Act One, Scene 4) act as a foil for Romeo as the three Montagues head for the Capulet ball?

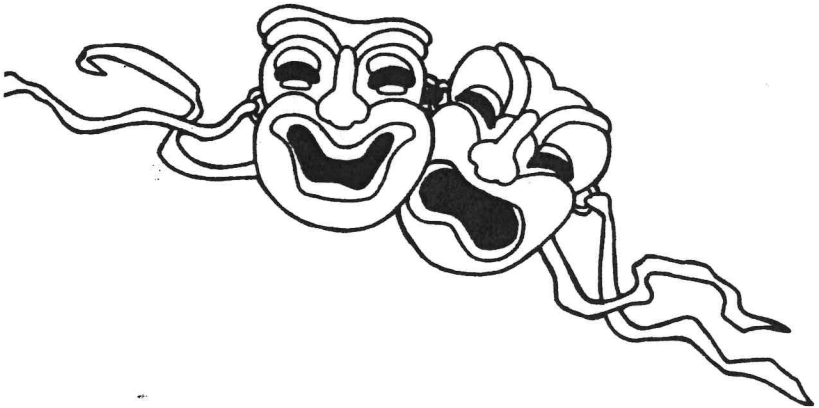
Masks, Masques, and More Masks

Theater masks originated with the primitive ritual false-face, which represented spirits or various aspects of the supernatural. In church drama of the Middle Ages, masks were used to represent God, saints, angels, and devils. The medieval tradition evolved into the court **masque**, a performance of dancing and acting by masked players that was popular with English nobility in Shakespeare's day. Italian mimes of the Renaissance introduced the half-mask. Off-stage, the half-mask, or domino, gained popularity as a disguise at masquerades, such as the Capulets' masked ball. Half-masks were worn by ladies to keep their complexions "fair"—that is, pale, to conform to aristocratic standards of feminine beauty. The half-mask was typically made of velvet, satin, or papier-mâché, and was held on by ribbons that were attached to the sides and tied in the back of the wearer's head—the half-mask also became a fashionable accessory to flirtation.

LITERARY CONCEPT

Tragedy

In drama, **tragedy** refers to a play in which events turn out disastrously for the main character or characters. The tragic character generally elicits both pity and fear in readers or viewers—pity because they feel sorry for the character, and fear because they realize that the character's struggles are an inevitable part of human lives, including their own. Usually the tragic hero or heroine dies at the end of the play.



Real Boys Wore Silk

The boys who played the female roles were not considered effeminate by most Elizabethans. A renaissance man could write poetry, dazzle in jewels and silk, wear perfume, and cry, suffering no loss of manliness. Boys who apprenticed as actors signed on to a rigorous regimen of daily training in acting, singing, and dancing. Before they could play a coveted role such as Juliet in a first-rate company like the King's Men, they had to know their profession well, move gracefully, and use their voices convincingly. Those who excelled faced the happy prospect of a lucrative career, as popular actors could live well on their incomes. It was the playwright who attempted to live solely by writing who starved, and Shakespeare was not exempt. He wrote his plays at legendary speed, often working on two or more at a time. As a playwright he became immortal, but it was as an exceptionally fine actor that he prospered.



Act One (continued)

The Capulet Women

Juliet is just three weeks short of her 14th birthday, which takes place on the eve of Lammas-tide, a harvest festival celebrated on August 1. She may have been named after the month of her birth, July. Her mother is less than 30 years old.

Rules of the Feud

Shakespeare's Verona is not the only place where families fight to settle disputes. According to a *Newsweek* article, blood feuds, or vendetta killings, have resumed in Albania since the collapse of communism in that country. Those killings have resulted in large part from land reforms and government attempts to divide up collective farms among various families with competing claims to the same properties. These property disputes have been settled in increasing numbers by murder. Blood feuds in Albania, which date back at least to the Ottoman Empire and were strongly suppressed under communist rule, are now conducted by grimly strict rules. An assassin must give the victim warning before killing him. The victim must never be struck from behind. The corpse must be laid out on its back and robbing the dead person is forbidden. Shepherds are off-limits. Men, or women, are obligated, and sometimes shamed into these killings to uphold their family's honor.

Choice or Chance?

The ancient Greeks believed that human suffering was fated by the gods and visited on both the innocent and the guilty alike. By Shakespeare's time, though, more people believed that suffering was the result of poor choices on the part of individuals. The description of "star-crossed" lovers in the Prologue suggests that these lovers are doomed from the start.

Throughout the play, the role of fate is constantly stressed. However, Romeo and Juliet also make decisions that bring about their unhappy fate, so choice is also a factor in their ruin.



VOCABULARY

Prologue and Act One

Olde Words

| | |
|-------------|--|
| doth | does |
| 'tis | it is |
| ay | yes |
| nay | no |
| thee | you (second person familiar; obj. form) |
| thou | you (second person familiar; subj. form) |
| wert | were (second person familiar) |