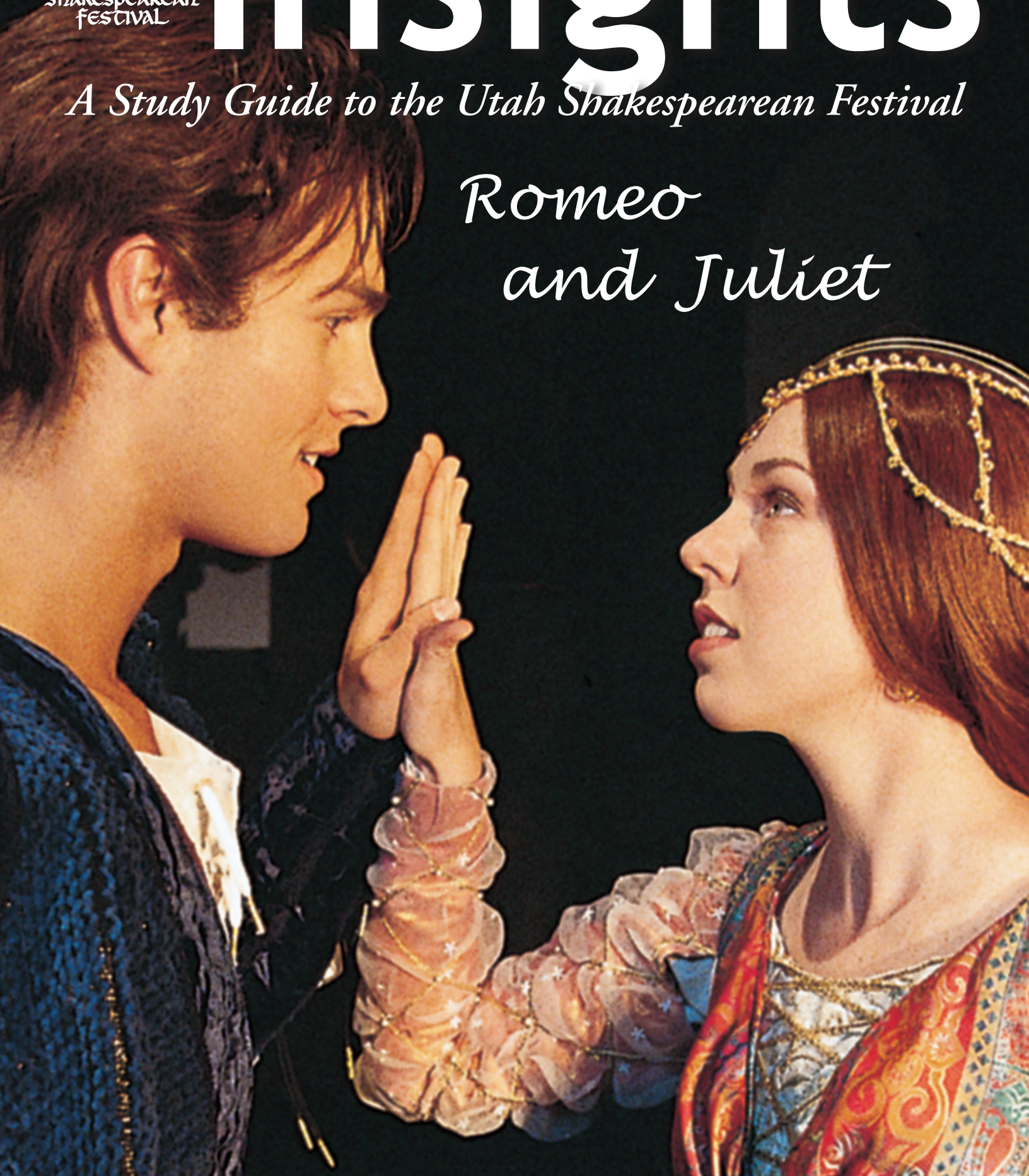




# Insights

*A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespearean Festival*

*Romeo  
and Juliet*



The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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For more information about Festival education programs:

Utah Shakespearean Festival

351 West Center Street

Cedar City, Utah 84720

435-586-7880

[www.bard.org](http://www.bard.org).

# Romeo and Juliet

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# Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words

By S. S. Moorty

“No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of The Works of William Shakespeare. It is not always thought that these books should be read in maturer years, but they must be present as symbols of Religion and Culture” (G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*. Rev. & Exp. [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 11).

We, the Shakespearean-theater goers and lovers, devotedly and ritualistically watch and read the Bard’s plays not for exciting stories and complex plots. Rather, Shakespeare’s language is a vital source of our supreme pleasure in his plays. Contrary to ill-conceived notions, Shakespeare’s language is not an obstacle to appreciation, though it may prove to be difficult to understand. Instead, it is the communicative and evocative power of Shakespeare’s language that is astonishingly rich in vocabulary—about 29,000 words—strikingly presented through unforgettable characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Rosalind, Viola, Iago, Shylock, etc.

In the high school classroom, students perceive Shakespeare’s language as “Old English.” Actually Shakespeare’s linguistic environment, experience, and exposure was, believe it or not, closer to our own times than to Chaucer’s, two hundred years earlier. Indeed, the history and development of the English language unfolds as follows: Old English, 449-1100; Middle English 1100-1500; and Modern English 1500-present. Shakespeare was firmly in the Modern English period.

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old and Middle English had taken place; yet rigid notions about “correctness” had not yet been standardized in grammars. The past five centuries have advanced the cause of standardized positions for words; yet the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness. Ideally it is rewarding to study several facets of Shakespeare’s English: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, wordplay, and imagery. The present overview will, however, be restricted to “vocabulary.”

To Polonius’s inquisitive question “What do you read, my lord?” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.191) Hamlet nonchalantly and intriguingly aptly replies: “Words, words, words” (2.2.192). This many-splendored creation of Shakespeare’s epitomizes the playwright’s own fascination with the dynamic aspect of English language, however troubling it may be to modern audiences and readers. Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language, apart from imparting new meanings to known words. At times Shakespeare could teasingly employ the same word for different shades of thought. Barowne’s single line, “Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1.1.77), as Harry Levin in his *General Introduction to The Riverside Shakespeare* (9) explains, “uses ‘light’ in four significations: intellect, seeking wisdom, cheats eyesight out of daylight.”

Another instance: Othello as he enters his bedroom with a light before he smothers his dear, innocent Desdemona soliloquizes: “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (*Othello*, 5.2.7) Here ‘light’ compares the light of Othello’s lamp or torch to Desdemona’s ‘light’ of life.

In both instances, the repeated simple ordinary word carries extraordinary shades of meaning. “Usually such a tendency in a Shakespeare play indicates a more or less conscious thematic intent.” (Paul A. Jorgensen, *Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words* [Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1962], 100).

Living in an age of the “grandiose humanistic confidence in the power of the word” (Levin 9), Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant that he had the license to experiment with the language, further blessed by the fact that “there were no English grammars to lay down rules or dictionaries to restrict word-formation. This was an immeasurable boon for writers” (Levin 10). Surely Shakespeare took full advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment with, and to indulge in lavishly.

However intriguing, captivating, mind-teasing, beguiling, and euphonious, Shakespeare’s vocabulary can be a stumbling block, especially for readers. “In the theater the speaking actor frequently relies on tone, semantic drive, narrative context, and body language to communicate the sense of utterly unfamiliar terms and phrases, but on the page such words become more noticeable and confusing” (Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents* [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996], 184).

Unlocking the meaning of Shakespeare’s vocabulary can prove to be an interesting challenge. Such words include those which “have dropped from common use like ‘bisson’ (blind) or those that the playwright seems to have created from Latin roots . . . but that did not catch on, such as ‘conspectuities’ (eyesight or vision) or ‘unplausible’ (doubtful or disapproving). Especially confusing are those words that have shifted meaning over the intervening centuries, such as ‘proper’ (handsome), ‘nice’ (squeamish or delicate), ‘silly’ (innocent), or ‘cousin’ (kinsman, that is, not necessarily the child of an aunt or uncle” (McDonald 184). Because of semantic change, when Shakespeare uses ‘conceit,’ he does not mean ‘vanity,’ as we might understand it to be. Strictly following etymology, Shakespeare means a ‘conception’ or ‘notion,’ or possibly the ‘imagination’ itself.

Perhaps several Shakespearean words “would have been strange to Shakespeare’s audience because they were the products of his invention or unique usage. Some words that probably originated with him include: ‘auspicious,’ ‘assassination,’ ‘disgraceful,’ ‘dwindle,’ ‘savagery.’” Certainly a brave soul, he was “ a most audacious inventor of words.” To appreciate and understand Shakespeare’s English in contrast to ours, we ought to suspend our judgment and disbelief and allow respect for the “process of semantic change, which has been continually eroding or encrusting his original meaning” (Levin 8).

Shakespeare’s vocabulary has received greater attention than any other aspect of his language. Perhaps this is because it is the most accessible with no burdensome complications. Whatever the cause, Shakespeare’s language will forever be challenging and captivating.

# Not of an Age, but for All Mankind

By Douglas A. Burger

After an enormous expenditure of money and effort, Shakespeare's Globe Theater has risen again, four centuries later, on London's south bank of the Thames. Designed as a faithful reconstruction of the original, it uses the building methods of the time and traditional materials (oak timbers, plaster walls, wooden pegs, water-reeds for thatching the roof). From above, the shape seems circular (actually, it is twenty-six sided) with three covered tiers of seats surrounding a central area which is open to the sky. There the "groundlings" may stand to see the action taking place on the stage, which occupies almost half of the inner space. There are no artificial lights, no conventional sets, no fancy rigging.

Seeing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon sunlight at the new Globe must come very close to the experience of those early-day Londoners, except, of course, that we in the twentieth-century behave better. We don't yell insults at the actors, spit, or toss orange peels on the ground. We also smell better: the seventeenth-century playwright, Thomas Dekker, calls the original audience "Stinkards . . . glewed together in crowdes with the Steames of strong breath" (*Shakespeare's Globe: The Guide Book* [London: International Globe Center, 1996], 42). And we are safer. The first Globe burned to the ground. The new theater has more exits, fire-retardant insulation concealed in the walls, and water-sprinklers that poke through the thatch of the roof.

That hard-headed capitalists and officials would be willing, even eager, to invest in the project shows that Shakespeare is good business. The new Globe is just one example. Cedar City's own Utah Shakespearean Festival makes a significant contribution to the economy of southern Utah. A sizable percentage of all the tourist dollars spent in England goes to Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, which would be a sleepy little agricultural town without its favorite son. The situation seems incredible. In our whole history, what other playwright could be called a major economic force? Who else—what single individual—could be listed along with agriculture, mining, and the like as an industry of a region? Why Shakespeare?

The explanation, of course, goes further than an attempt to preserve our cultural traditions. In an almost uncanny way, Shakespeare's perceptions remain valuable for our own understandings of life, and probably no other writer remains so insightful, despite the constantly changing preoccupations of audiences over time.

The people of past centuries, for example, looked to the plays for nuggets of wisdom and quotable quotes, and many of Shakespeare's lines have passed into common parlance. There is an old anecdote about the woman, who on first seeing *Hamlet*, was asked how she liked the play. She replied, "Oh, very nice, my dear, but so full of quotations." She has it backwards of course. Only the King James Bible has lent more "quotations" to English than Shakespeare.

Citizens of the late nineteenth century sought in the plays for an understanding of human nature, valuing Shakespeare's character for traits that they recognized in themselves and in others. The fascination continues to the present day as some of our best-known movie stars attempt to find new dimensions in the great characters: Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh in *Hamlet*, Lawrence Fishburn in *Othello*, Leonardo de Caprio in *Romeo + Juliet*, to name just a few.

Matters of gender, class, and race have preoccupied more recent audiences. Beatrice sounds a rather feminist note in *Much Ado about Nothing* in her advice to her cousin about

choosing a husband: Curtsy to your father, but say “Father, as it please me.” *Coriolanus* presents a recurring dilemma about class relations in its explorations of the rights and wrongs involved in a great man’s attempt to control the masses. Racial attitudes are illuminated in *Othello*, where the European characters always mark the hero by his race, always identify him first as the “Moor,” are always aware of his difference. London’s new/old Globe is thus a potent symbol of the plays’ continuing worth to us. The very building demonstrates the utter accuracy of the lines written so long ago that Shakespeare is not “of an age” but “for all time.”

# Elizabeth's England

In his entire career, William Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England. His characters lived in medieval England (*Richard II*), France (*As You Like It*), Vienna (*Measure for Measure*), fifteenth-century Italy (*Romeo and Juliet*), the England ruled by Elizabeth's father (*Henry VIII*) and elsewhere—anywhere and everywhere, in fact, except Shakespeare's own time and place. But all Shakespeare's plays—even when they were set in ancient Rome—reflected the life of Elizabeth's England (and, after her death in 1603, that of her successor, James I). Thus, certain things about these extraordinary plays will be easier to understand if we know a little more about Elizabethan England.

Elizabeth's reign was an age of exploration—exploration of the world, exploration of man's nature, and exploration of the far reaches of the English language. This renaissance of the arts and sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments—the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare—and many other treasures as well.

Shakespeare made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language. He employed more words than any other writer in history—more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays—and he never hesitated to try a new word, revive an old one, or make one up. Among the words which first appeared in print in his works are such everyday terms as “critic,” “assassinate,” “bump,” “gloomy,” “suspicious,” “and hurry;” and he invented literally dozens of phrases which we use today: such un-Shakespearean expressions as “catching a cold,” “the mind's eye,” “elbow room,” and even “pomp and circumstance.”

Elizabethan England was a time for heroes. The ideal man was a courtier, an adventurer, a fencer with the skill of Tybalt, a poet no doubt better than Orlando, a conversationalist with the wit of Rosalind and the eloquence of Richard II, and a gentleman. In addition to all this, he was expected to take the time, like Brutus, to examine his own nature and the cause of his actions and (perhaps unlike Brutus) to make the right choices. The real heroes of the age did all these things and more.

Despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified, to us; marriage, for example, was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride. In fact, women were still relatively powerless under the law.

The idea that women were “lower” than men was one small part of a vast concern with order which was extremely important to many Elizabethans. Most people believed that everything, from the lowest grain of sand to the highest angel, had its proper position in the scheme of things. This concept was called “the great chain of being.” When things were in their proper place, harmony was the result; when order was violated, the entire structure was shaken.

This idea turns up again and again in Shakespeare. The rebellion against Richard II brings bloodshed to England for generations; Romeo and Juliet's rebellion against their parents contributes to their tragedy; and the assassination in *Julius Caesar* throws Rome into civil war.

Many Elizabethans also perceived duplications in the chain of order. They believed, for example, that what the sun is to the heavens, the king is to the state. When something went wrong in the heavens, rulers worried: before Julius Caesar and Richard II were overthrown, comets and meteors appeared, the moon turned the color of blood, and other bizarre astronomical phenomena were reported. Richard himself compares his fall to a premature setting of the sun; when he descends from the top of Flint Castle to meet the conquering



Bolingbroke, he likens himself to the driver of the sun's chariot in Greek mythology:  
“Down, down I come, like glist'ring Phaeton” (3.3.178).

All these ideas find expression in Shakespeare's plays, along with hundreds of others—most of them not as strange to our way of thinking. As dramatized by the greatest playwright in the history of the world, the plays offer us a fascinating glimpse of the thoughts and passions of a brilliant age. Elizabethan England was a brief skyrocket of art, adventure, and ideas which quickly burned out; but Shakespeare's plays keep the best parts of that time alight forever.

(Adapted from “The Shakespeare Plays,” educational materials made possible by Exxon, Metropolitan Life, Morgan Guaranty, and CPB.)

# History Is Written by the Victors

From *Insights*, 1994

William Shakespeare wrote ten history plays chronicling English kings from the time of the Magna Carta (*King John*) to the beginning of England's first great civil war, the Wars of the Roses (*Richard II*) to the conclusion of the war and the reuniting of the two factions (*Richard III*), to the reign of Queen Elizabeth's father (*Henry VIII*). Between these plays, even though they were not written in chronological order, is much of the intervening history of England, in the six Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI plays.

In writing these plays, Shakespeare had nothing to help him except the standard history books of his day. The art of the historian was not very advanced in this period, and no serious attempt was made to get at the exact truth about a king and his reign. Instead, the general idea was that any nation that opposed England was wrong, and that any Englishman who opposed the winning side in a civil war was wrong also.

Since Shakespeare had no other sources, the slant that appears in the history books of his time also appears in his plays. Joan of Arc opposed the English and was not admired in Shakespeare's day, so she is portrayed as a comic character who wins her victories through witchcraft. Richard III fought against the first Tudor monarchs and was therefore labeled in the Tudor histories as a vicious usurper, and he duly appears in Shakespeare's plays as a murdering monster.

Shakespeare wrote nine of his history plays under Queen Elizabeth. She did not encourage historical truthfulness, but rather a patriotism, an exultant, intense conviction that England was the best of all possible countries and the home of the most favored of mortals. And this patriotism breathes through all the history plays and binds them together. England's enemy is not so much any individual king as the threat of civil war, and the history plays come to a triumphant conclusion when the threat of civil war is finally averted, and the great queen, Elizabeth, is born.

Shakespeare was a playwright, not a historian, and, even when his sources were correct, he would sometimes juggle his information for the sake of effective stagecraft. He was not interested in historical accuracy; he was interested in swiftly moving action and in people. Shakespeare's bloody and superb king seems more convincing than the real Richard III, merely because Shakespeare wrote so effectively about him. Shakespeare moved in a different world from that of the historical, a world of creation rather than of recorded fact, and it is in this world that he is so supreme a master.

# Mr. Shakespeare, I Presume

by Diana Major Spencer From *Insights*, 1994

Could the plays known as Shakespeare's have been written by a rural, semi-literate, uneducated, wife-deserting, two-bit actor who spelled his name differently each of the six times he wrote it down? Could such a man know enough about Roman history, Italian geography, French grammar, and English court habits to create *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Henry V*? Could he know enough about nobility and its tenuous relationship to royalty to create *King Lear* and *Macbeth*?

Are these questions even worth asking? Some very intelligent people think so. On the other hand, some very intelligent people think not. Never mind quibbles about how a line should be interpreted, or how many plays Shakespeare wrote and which ones, or which of the great tragedies reflected personal tragedies. The question of authorship is "The Shakespeare Controversy."

Since Mr. Cowell, quoting the deceased Dr. Wilmot, cast the first doubt about William of Stratford in an 1805 speech before the Ipswich Philological Society, nominees for the "real author" have included philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Oxford--among others.

The arguments evoke two premises: first, that the proven facts about the William Shakespeare who was christened at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564 do not configure a man of sufficient nobility of thought and language to have written the plays; and, second, that the man from Stratford is nowhere concretely identified as the author of the plays. The name "Shakespeare"—in one of its spellings—appears on early quartos, but the man represented by the name may not be the one from Stratford.

One group of objections to the Stratford man follows from the absence of any record that he ever attended school—in Stratford or anywhere else. If he were uneducated, the arguments go, how could his vocabulary be twice as large as the learned Milton's? How could he know so much history, law, or philosophy? If he were a country bumpkin, how could he know so much of hawking, hounding, courtly manners, and daily habits of the nobility? How could he have traveled so much, learning about other nations of Europe in enough detail to make them the settings for his plays?

The assumptions of these arguments are that such rich and noble works as those attributed to a playwright using the name "Shakespeare" could have been written only by someone with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics could be distilled from the "facts" of his life. He would have to be noble; he would have to be well-educated; and so forth. On these grounds the strongest candidate to date is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford.

A debate that has endured its peaks and valleys, the controversy catapulted to center stage in 1984 with the publication of Charlton Ogburn's *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. Ogburn, a former army intelligence officer, builds a strong case for Oxford—if one can hurdle the notions that the author wasn't Will Shakespeare, that literary works should be read autobiographically, and that literary creation is nothing more than reporting the facts of one's own life. "The Controversy" was laid to rest—temporarily, at least—by justices Blackmun, Brennan, and Stevens of the United States Supreme Court who, after hearing evidence from both sides in a mock trial conducted September 25, 1987 at American University in Washington, D.C., found in favor of the Bard of Avon. Hooray for our side!

# A Nest of Singing Birds

From *Insights*, 1992

Musical development was part of the intellectual and social movement that influenced all England during the Tudor Age. The same forces that produced writers like Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Francis Bacon also produced musicians of corresponding caliber. So numerous and prolific were these talented and imaginative men—men whose reputations were even in their own day firmly established and well founded—that they have been frequently and aptly referred to as a nest of singing birds.

One such figure was Thomas Tallis, whose music has officially accompanied the Anglican service since the days of Elizabeth I; another was his student, William Boyd, whose variety of religious and secular compositions won him international reputation.

Queen Elizabeth I, of course, provided an inspiration for the best efforts of Englishmen, whatever their aims and activities. For music, she was the ideal patroness. She was an accomplished performer on the virginal (forerunner to the piano), and she aided her favorite art immensely in every way possible, bestowing her favors on the singers in chapel and court and on the musicians in public and private theatrical performances. To the great composers of her time, she was particularly gracious and helpful.

Singing has been an integral part of English life for as long as we have any knowledge. Long before the music was written down, the timeless folk songs were a part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage. The madrigals and airs that are enjoyed each summer at the Utah Shakespearean Festival evolved from these traditions.

It was noted by Bishop Jewel in 1560 that sometimes at Paul's Cross there would be 6,000 people singing together, and before the sermon, the whole congregation always sang a psalm, together with the choir and organ. When that thundering unity of congregational chorus came in, "I was so transported there was no room left in my whole body, mind, or spirit for anything below divine and heavenly raptures."

Religious expression was likely the dominant musical motif of the Elizabethan period; however, the period also saw development of English stage music, with Morley, John Wilson, and Robert Johnson setting much of their music to the plays of Shakespeare. The masque, a semi-musical entertainment, reached a high degree of perfection at the court of James I, where the courtiers themselves were sometimes participants. An educated person of the time was expected to perform music more than just fairly well, and an inability in this area might elicit whispered comments regarding lack of genteel upbringing, not only in the ability to take one's part in a madrigal, but also in knowing the niceties of musical theory. Henry Peacham wrote in *The Compleat Gentleman* in 1662 that one of the fundamental qualities of a gentleman was to be able to "sing your part sure, and...to play the same upon your viol."

Outside the walls of court could be heard street songs, lighthearted catches, and ballads, all of which indicates that music was not confined to the cathedrals or court. We still have extant literally hundreds of ballads, street songs, and vendors' cries that were sung or hummed on the street and played with all their complicated variations on all levels of Elizabethan society.

Instruments of the period were as varied as the music and peoples, and the instrument and songbooks which remain in existence today are indicative of the high level of excellence enjoyed by the Elizabethans. Songbooks, mainly of part-songs for three, four, five, and six

voices exist today, as do books of dance music: corrantos, pavans, and galliards. Records from one wealthy family indicate the family owned forty musical instruments, including twelve viols, seven recorders, four lutes, five virginals, various brasses and woodwinds, and two “great organs.” To have use for such a great number of instruments implies a fairly large group of players resident with the family or staying with them as invited guests, and the players of the most popular instruments (lutes, virginals, and viols) would be playing from long tradition, at least back to King Henry VIII. In short, music was as necessary to the public and private existence of a Renaissance Englishman as any of the basic elements of life.

The Utah Shakespearean Festival musicians perform each summer on authentic replicas of many of these Renaissance instruments. The music they perform is authentic from the Elizabethan period, and the instruments are made available for audience inspection and learning.

# Actors in Shakespeare's Day

By Stephanie Chidester From *Insights*, 1994

The status of the actor in society has never been entirely stable but has fluctuated from the beginnings of the theatre to the present day. The ancient Greeks often considered actors as servants of Dionysus, and their performances were a sort of religious rite. Roman actors, often slaves, were seen as the scraps of society, only one step above gladiators. In medieval Europe, both the theatre and the actor, suppressed by the Catholic Church, were almost non-existent but gradually re-emerged in the form of the liturgy and, later, the Mystery plays. The actors of Shakespeare's age also saw fluctuations in reputation; actors were alternately classified as "vagabonds and sturdy beggars," as an act of Parliament in 1572 defined them, and as servants of noblemen.

As early as 1482, noblemen such as Richard, duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), the earl of Essex, and Lord Arundel kept acting companies among their retainers. But other than these select groups protected by nobles, actors lived lives of danger and instability because when they abandoned their respectable trades, they also left behind the comfort and protection of the trade guilds.

However, life soon became much more difficult for both of these classes of actors. In 1572, Parliament passed two acts which damaged thespians' social status. In the first one, the Queen forbade "the unlawful retaining of multitudes of unordinary servants by liveries, badges, and other signs and tokens (contrary to the good and ancient statutes and laws of this realm)" in order to "curb the power of local grandees" (Dennis Kay, *Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era* [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 88). One result of this was that some of the actors, now considered superfluous, were turned away.

To make matters even worse, these actors faced yet another impediment: the "Acte for the punishment of Vacabondes" (Kay, 88), in which actors were declared "vagabonds and masterless men and hence were subject to arrest and imprisonment" (Thomas Marc Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball, *A Short View of Elizabethan Drama* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943], 46).

However, there were still nobles, such as the earl of Leicester and the earl of Sussex, who endorsed players; the protector would usually seek royal permission for these actors to perform in London or, less frequently, some other less prestigious town. Thus the actors were able to venture forth without fear of arrest. It is through these circumstances that Shakespeare ends up an actor in London.

There are many theories—guesses really—of how Shakespeare got into the theatre. He may have joined a group of strolling players, performed around the countryside, and eventually made it to London, the theatrical hub of Britain. Another theory suggests that he began as a schoolmaster, wrote a play (possibly *The Comedy of Errors*) and then decided to take it to London; or, alternately, he could have simply gone directly to that great city, with or without a play in hand, to try his luck.

An interesting speculation is that while he was young, Shakespeare might have participated in one of the cycles of Mystery plays in Stratford: "On one occasion the Stratford corporation laid out money for an entertainment at Pentecost. In 1583 they paid 13s 4d 'to Davi Jones and his company for his pastime at Whitsuntide.' Davi Jones had been married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Adrian Quiney, and after her death in 1579 he took as his wife a Hathaway, Frances. Was Shakespeare one of the youths who trimmed themselves for the Whitsun pastime?" (S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* [New York: New American Library, 1977], 111).

But however he got into the theatre and to London, he had made a very definite impression on his competitors by 1592, when playwright Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare as both actor and author: “There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapt in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and . . . is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country” (G. B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare* [New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1947], 1).

We don’t often think of Shakespeare as primarily an actor, perhaps because most of what we know of him comes from the plays he wrote rather than the parts he played. Nevertheless, he made much of his money as an actor and sharer in his company: “At least to start with, his status, his security derived more from his acting skill and his eye for business than from his pen” (Kay, 95). Had he been only a playwright, he would likely have died a poor man, as did Robert Greene: “In the autumn of 1592, Robert Greene, the most popular author of his generation, lay penniless and dying. . . . The players had grown rich on the products of his brain, and now he was deserted and alone” (Harrison, 1).

While Shakespeare made a career of acting, there are critics who might dispute his acting talent. For instance, almost a century after Shakespeare’s death, “an anonymous enthusiast of the stage . . . remarked . . . that ‘Shakespear . . . was a much better poet, than player’” (Schoenbaum, 201). However, Shakespeare could have been quite a good actor, and this statement would still be true. One sign of his skill as an actor is that he is mentioned in the same breath with Burbage and Kemp: “The accounts of the royal household for Mar 15 [1595] record payments to ‘William Kempe William Shakespeare & Richarde Burbage seruantes to the Lord Chamberlain’” (Kay, 174).

Another significant indication of his talent is the very fact that he played in London rather than touring other less lucrative towns. If players were to be legally retained by noblemen, they had to prove they could act, and one means of demonstrating their legitimacy was playing at court for Queen Elizabeth. The more skilled companies obtained the queen’s favor and were granted permission to remain in London.

Not all companies, however, were so fortunate: “Sussex’s men may not have been quite up to the transition from rural inn-yards to the more demanding circumstances of court performance. Just before the Christmas season of 1574, for example, they were inspected (‘perused’) by officials of the Revels Office, with a view to being permitted to perform before the queen; but they did not perform” (Kay, 90). Shakespeare and his company, on the other hand, performed successfully in London from the early 1590s until 1611. It would be a mistake to classify William Shakespeare as only a playwright, even the greatest playwright of the English-speaking world; he was also “an actor, a sharer, a member of a company” (Kay, 95), obligations that were extremely relevant to his plays. As a man of the theatre writing for a company, he knew what would work on stage and what would not and was able to make his plays practical as well as brilliant. And perhaps more importantly, his theatrical experience must have taught him much about the human experience, about everyday lives and roles, just as his plays show us that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.149-50).

# Shakespeare's Audience: A Very Motley Crowd

From *Insights*, 1992

When Shakespeare peeped through the curtain at the audience gathered to hear his first play, he looked upon a very motley crowd. The pit was filled with men and boys. The galleries contained a fair proportion of women, some not too respectable. In the boxes were a few gentlemen from the royal courts, and in the lords' box or perhaps sitting on the stage was a group of extravagantly dressed gentlemen of fashion. Vendors of nuts and fruits moved about through the crowd. The gallants were smoking; the apprentices in the pit were exchanging rude witticisms with the painted ladies.

When Shakespeare addressed his audience directly, he did so in terms of gentle courtesy or pleasant raillery. In *Hamlet*, however, he does let fall the opinion that the groundlings (those on the ground, the cheapest seats) were "for the most part capable of nothing but dumb shows and noise." His recollections of the pit of the Globe may have added vigor to his ridicule of the Roman mob in *Julius Caesar*.

On the other hand, the theatre was a popular institution, and the audience was representative of all classes of London life. Admission to standing room in the pit was a penny, and an additional penny or two secured a seat in the galleries. For seats in the boxes or for stools on the stage, still more was charged, up to sixpence or half a crown.

Attendance at the theatres was astonishingly large. There were often five or six theatres giving daily performances, which would mean that out of a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty thousand or more spectators each week attended the theatre. When we remember that a large class of the population disapproved of the theatre, and that women of respectability were not frequent patrons of the public playhouses, this attendance is remarkable.

Arrangements for the comfort of the spectators were meager, and spectators were often disorderly. Playbills seem to have been posted all about town and in the theatre, and the title of the piece was announced on the stage. These bills contained no lists of actors, and there were no programs, ushers, or tickets. There was usually one door for the audience, where the admission fee was deposited in a box carefully watched by the money taker, and additional sums were required at entrance to the galleries or boxes. When the three o'clock trumpets announced the beginning of a performance, the assembled audience had been amusing itself by eating, drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and they sometimes continued these occupations during a performance. Pickpockets were frequent, and, if caught, were tied to a post on the stage. Disturbances were not infrequent, sometimes resulting in general rioting.

The Elizabethan audience was fond of unusual spectacle and brutal physical suffering. They liked battles and murders, processions and fireworks, ghosts and insanity. They expected comedy to abound in beatings, and tragedy in deaths. While the audience at the Globe expected some of these sensations and physical horrors, they did not come primarily for these. (Real blood and torture were available nearby at the bear baitings, and public executions were not uncommon.) Actually, there were very few public entertainments offering as little brutality as did the theatre.

Elizabethans attended the public playhouses for learning. They attended for romance, imagination, idealism, and art; the audience was not without refinement, and those looking for food for the imagination had nowhere to go but to the playhouse. There were no newspapers, no



magazines, almost no novels, and only a few cheap books; theatre filled the desire for story discussion among people lacking other educational and cultural opportunities.

The most remarkable case of Shakespeare's theatre filling an educational need is probably that of English history. The growth of national patriotism culminating in the English victory over the Spanish Armada gave dramatists a chance to use the historical material, and for the fifteen years from the Armada to the death of Elizabeth, the stage was deluged with plays based on the events of English chronicles, and familiarity with English history became a cultural asset of the London crowd,

Law was a second area where the Elizabethan public seems to have been fairly well informed, and successful dramatists realized the influence that the great development of civil law in the sixteenth century exercised upon the daily life of the London citizen. In this area, as in others, the dramatists did not hesitate to cultivate the cultural background of their audience whenever opportunity offered, and the ignorance of the multitude did not prevent it from taking an interest in new information and from offering a receptive hearing to the accumulated lore of lawyers, historians, humanists, and playwrights.

The audience was used to the spoken word, and soon became trained in blank verse, delighting in monologues, debates, puns, metaphors, stump speakers, and sonorous declamation. The public was accustomed to the acting of the old religious dramas, and the new acting in which the spoken words were listened to caught on rapidly. The new poetry and the great actors who recited it found a sensitive audience. There were many moments during a play when spectacle, brutality, and action were all forgotten, and the audience fed only on the words. Shakespeare and his contemporaries may be deemed fortunate in having an audience essentially attentive, eager for the newly unlocked storehouse of secular story, and possessing the sophistication and interest to be fed richly by the excitements and levities on the stage.

# Shakespearean Snapshots

From *Insights*, 2002

By Ace G. Pilkington

It is hard to get from the facts of Shakespeare's life to any sense of what it must have been like to have lived it. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. The day of his birth is not certain, but it may have been the same as the day of his death—April 23—if he was baptized, as was usual at the time, three days after he was born. He married Anne Hathaway in the winter of 1582–83, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. He became the father of three children. The first was Susannah, who was born around May 23, close enough to the date of the wedding to suggest that the marriage was not entirely voluntary. Shakespeare's twins, Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes (at least unknown by us at this distance in time) in 1596. Shakespeare's career as actor, theatre owner, manager, and, of course, playwright began in the vicinity of 1590 and continued for the rest of his life, though there are clear indications that he spent more and more time in Stratford and less and less in London from 1611 on. His work in the theatre made him wealthy, and his extraordinary plays brought him a measure of fame, though nothing like what he deserved or would posthumously receive.

It's hard to get even the briefest sense of what Shakespeare's life was like from such information. It is probably impossible ever to know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but maybe we can get closer to what he saw and heard and even smelled. Perhaps some snapshots—little close-ups—might help to bring us nearer to the world in which Shakespeare lived if not quite to the life he lived in that world. In Shakespeare's youth, chimneys were a new thing. Before that, smoke was left to find its way out through a hole in the roof, often a thatched roof, and there were even some who maintained that this smoky atmosphere was better than the newfangled fresh air that chimneys made possible—along with a greater division of rooms and more privacy.

In the year of Shakespeare's birth, Stratford had more trees than houses—"upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes" (Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare's Professional Career* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 1). Peter Levi says, "The town was so full of elm trees that it must have looked and sounded like a woodland settlement. For example, Mr. Gibbs's house on Rothermarket had twelve elms in the garden and six in front of the door. Thomas Attford on Ely Street had another twelve. The town boundaries were marked by elms or groups of elms (*The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* [New York: Wings Books, 1988], 7). Shakespeare's "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" becomes a far more majestic image with the picture of Stratford's elms in mind. And the birds themselves had a sound which modern ears no longer have a chance to enjoy. "We must realize that it was ordinary for . . . Shakespeare to hear a dawn chorus of many hundreds of birds at once. . . . as a young man thirty years ago I have heard a deafening dawn chorus in the wooded Chilterns, on Shakespeare's road to London" (Levi 10).

Exactly what Shakespeare's road to London may have been or at least how he first made his way there and became an actor is much debated. He might have been a schoolmaster or fifty other things, but he may well have started out as he ended up—as a player. We can then, in John Southworth's words, "Picture a sixteen-year-old lad on a cart, growing year by year into manhood, journeying out of the Arden of his childhood into ever more unfamiliar, distant regions, travelling ill-made roads in all weathers, sleeping in inns, hearing and memorising strange new dialects and forms of speech, meeting with every possible type and character of person; learning, most of all perhaps, from the audiences to which he played in guildhalls and inns" (*Shakespeare the Player: A Life in the Theatre* [Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000], 30). At some time in his life—in fact, many times—Shakespeare must have known theatrical tours very like that.

In London itself, the new Globe, the best theatre in (or rather just outside of) the city, was in an area with a large number of prisons and an unpleasant smell. “Garbage had preceded actors on the marshy land where the new playhouse was erected: ‘flanked with a ditch and forced out of a marsh’, according to Ben Jonson. Its cost . . . included the provision of heavy piles for the foundation, and a whole network of ditches in which the water rose and fell with the tidal Thames” (Garry O’Connor, *William Shakespeare: A Popular Life* [New York: Applause Books, 2000], 161). The playgoers came by water, and the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan “drew 3,000 or 4,000 people in boats across the Thames every day” (161). Peter Levi says of Shakespeare’s London, “The noise, the crowds, the animals and their droppings, the glimpses of grandeur and the amazing squalor of the poor, were beyond modern imagination” (49).

England was a place of fear and glory. Public executions were public entertainments. Severed heads decayed on city walls. Francis Bacon, whom Will Durant calls “the most powerful and influential intellect of his time” (*Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 327), had been “one of the persons commissioned to question prisoners under torture” in the 1580s (Levi 4). The opportune moment when Shakespeare became the most successful of playwrights was the destruction of Thomas Kyd, “who broke under torture and was never the same again,” and the death of Christopher Marlowe in a tavern brawl which was the result of plot and counterplot—a struggle, very probably, between Lord Burghley and Walter Raleigh (Levi 48). Shakespeare, who must have known the rumors and may have known the truth, cannot have helped shuddering at such monstrous good fortune. Still, all of the sights, smells, and terrors, from the birdsongs to the screams of torture, from the muddy tides to the ties of blood, became not only the textures and tonalities of Shakespeare’s life, but also the information and inspiration behind his plays.

# Ghosts, Witches, and Shakespeare

By Howard Waters

From *Insights*, 2006

Some time in the mid 1580s, young Will Shakespeare, for reasons not entirely clear to us, left his home, his wife, and his family in Stratford and set off for London. It was a time when Elizabeth, “la plus fine femme du monde,” as Henry III of France called her, had occupied the throne of England for over twenty-five years. The tragedy of Mary Stuart was past; the ordeal of Essex was in the future. Sir Francis Drake’s neutralization of the Spanish Armada was pending and rumors of war or invasion blew in from all the great ports.

What could have been more exciting for a young man from the country, one who was already more than half in love with words, than to be headed for London!

It was an exciting and frightening time, when the seven gates of London led to a maze of streets, narrow and dirty, crowded with tradesmen, carts, coaches, and all manner of humanity. Young Will would have seen the moated Tower of London, looking almost like an island apart. There was London Bridge crowded with tenements and at the southern end a cluster of traitors’ heads impaled on poles. At Tyburn thieves and murderers dangled, at Limehouse pirates were trussed up at low tide and left to wait for the water to rise over them. At Tower Hill the headsman’s axe flashed regularly, while for the vagabonds there were the whipping posts, and for the beggars there were the stocks. Such was the London of the workaday world, and young Will was undoubtedly mentally filing away details of what he saw, heard, and smelled.

Elizabethan people in general were an emotional lot and the ferocity of their entertainment reflected that fact. Bear-baiting, for example, was a highly popular spectator sport, and the structure where they were generally held was not unlike the theatres of the day. A bear was chained to a stake in the center of the pit, and a pack of large dogs was turned loose to bait, or fight, him. The bear eventually tired (fortunately for the remaining dogs!), and, well, you can figure the rest out for yourself. Then there were the public hangings, whippings, or drawing and quarterings for an afternoon’s entertainment. So, the violence in some of Shakespeare’s plays was clearly directed at an audience that reveled in it. Imagine the effect of having an actor pretend to bite off his own tongue and spit a chunk of raw liver that he had carefully packed in his jaw into the faces of the groundlings!

Despite the progressing enlightenment of the Renaissance, superstition was still rampant among Elizabethan Londoners, and a belief in such things as astrology was common (Ralph P. Boas and Barbara M. Hahna, “The Age of Shakespeare,” *Social Backgrounds of English Literature*, [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1931] 93). Through the position of stars many Elizabethans believed that coming events could be foretold even to the extent of mapping out a person’s entire life.

Where witches and ghosts were concerned, it was commonly accepted that they existed and the person who scoffed at them was considered foolish, or even likely to be cursed. Consider the fact that Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was supposedly cursed due to the playwright’s having given away a few more of the secrets of witchcraft than the weird sisters may have approved of. For a time, productions experienced an uncanny assortment of mishaps and injuries. Even today, it is often considered bad luck for members of the cast and crew to mention the name of the production, simply referred to as the Scottish Play. In preaching a sermon, Bishop Jewel warned the Queen: “It may please your Grace to understand that witches and sorcerers within these last few years are marvelously increased. Your Grace’s

subjects pine away, even unto death; their color fadeth; their flesh rotteth; their speech is benumbed; their senses bereft” (Walter Bromberg, “Witchcraft and Psychotherapy”, *The Mind of Man* [New York: Harper Torchbooks 1954], 54).

Ghosts were recognized by the Elizabethans in three basic varieties: the vision or purely subjective ghost, the authentic ghost who has died without opportunity of repentance, and the false ghost which is capable of many types of manifestations (Boas and Hahn). When a ghost was confronted, either in reality or in a Shakespearean play, some obvious discrimination was called for (and still is). Critics still do not always agree on which of these three types haunts the pages of *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, or *Hamlet*, or, in some cases, why they are necessary to the plot at all. After all, Shakespeare’s ghosts are a capricious lot, making themselves visible or invisible as they please. In *Richard III* there are no fewer than eleven ghosts on the stage who are visible only to Richard and Richmond. In *Macbeth* the ghost of Banquo repeatedly appears to Macbeth in crowded rooms but is visible only to him. In *Hamlet*, the ghost appears to several people on the castle battlements but only to Hamlet in his mother’s bedchamber. In the words of E.H. Seymour: “If we judge by sheer reason, no doubt we must banish ghosts from the stage altogether, but if we regulate our fancy by the laws of superstition, we shall find that spectres are privileged to be visible to whom they will (E.H. Seymour “Remarks, Critical, Conjectural, and Explanatory on Shakespeare” in *Macbeth A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* [New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963] 211).

Shakespeare’s audiences, and his plays, were the products of their culture. Since the validity of any literary work can best be judged by its public acceptance, not to mention its lasting power, it seems that Shakespeare’s ghosts and witches were, and are, enormously popular. If modern audiences and critics find themselves a bit skeptical, then they might consider bringing along a supply of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” Elizabethans simply had no need of it.

# Shakespeare's Day: What They Wore

The clothing which actors wear to perform a play is called a costume, to distinguish it from everyday clothing. In Shakespeare's time, acting companies spent almost as much on costumes as television series do today.

The costumes for shows in England were so expensive that visitors from France were a little envious. Kings and queens on the stage were almost as well dressed as kings and queens in real life.

Where did the acting companies get their clothes? Literally, "off the rack" and from used clothing sellers. Wealthy middle class people would often give their servants old clothes that they didn't want to wear any more, or would leave their clothes to the servants when they died. Since clothing was very expensive, people wore it as long as possible and passed it on from one person to another without being ashamed of wearing hand-me-downs. However, since servants were of a lower class than their employers, they weren't allowed to wear rich fabrics, and would sell these clothes to acting companies, who were allowed to wear what they wanted in performance.

A rich nobleman like Count Paris or a wealthy young man like Romeo would wear a doublet, possibly of velvet, and it might have gold embroidery. Juliet and Lady Capulet would have worn taffeta, silk, gold, or satin gowns, and everybody would have had hats, gloves, ruffs (an elaborate collar), gloves, stockings, and shoes equally elaborate.

For a play like *Romeo and Juliet*, which was set in a European country at about the same time Shakespeare wrote it, Elizabethan everyday clothes would have been fine—the audience would have been happy, and they would have been authentic for the play. However, since there were no costume shops who could make clothing suitable for, say, medieval Denmark for *Hamlet*, or ancient Rome for *Julius Caesar*, or Oberon and Titania's forest for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, these productions often looked slightly strange—can you imagine fairies in full Elizabethan collars and skirts? How would they move?

Today's audiences want costumes to be authentic, so that they can believe in the world of the play. However, *Romeo and Juliet* was recently set on Verona Beach, with very up-to-date clothes indeed; and about thirty years ago, *West Side Story*, an updated musical version of the *Romeo and Juliet* tale, was set in the Puerto Rican section of New York City.

**Activity:** Discuss what the affect of wearing "special" clothes is—to church, or to a party. Do you feel different? Do you act different? How many kinds of wardrobes do you have? School, play, best? Juliet and Romeo would have had only one type of clothing each, no matter how nice it was.

**Activity:** Perform a scene from the play in your everyday clothes, and then in more formal clothes. Ask the participants and the spectators to describe the differences between the two performances.

# About the Play

From *Romeo and Juliet*, Ed. David Bevington, Bantam, New York, 1988. xx-xxiv.

Although stories of forbidden love have been around as long as tongues could speak, a tale involving an unwanted marriage, sleeping potion, and missed message from a friendly friar first appeared with characters called Romeo Motecchi and Giulietta Cappelletti in Luigi da Porto's *Histoira* in 1530. Various authors and poets adapted and translated the tale for the next sixty years until it made its way to the eyes or ears of the up-and-coming poet/playwright William Shakespeare. In or about 1594 Shakespeare refreshed the story by shortening its time frame from nine months to less than a week, creating a new level of urgency, and highlighting the parts of some characters like Mercutio and the nurse, probably to fit them to the strengths of his own acting troupe, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The play was performed at the Globe Theatre to an audience that would have been as familiar with its basics as we are today.

Over the centuries the play has been continuously performed, but altered according to the fashions of its audience. For many years it was popular for the lovers to share a brief moment of recognition together in the tomb before Romeo's poison took effect. This tradition was carried into the present in Baz Lurhmann's movie, *Romeo + Juliet*, in 1996. Another popular variation was to end the play happily with Romeo arriving just in time to rescue his beloved. It wasn't until the mid 1800s that Shakespeare's original text began to be commonly performed again.

*Romeo and Juliet* has now been performed in countless countries and dozens of languages and has been successfully shown on the big screen every thirty years since 1936. Shakespeare's plot as been transposed into ballet and opera and was freely adapted to the hit musical *West Side Story* where Tony and Maria fight for their love amidst the ethnic divides of 1950s New York. Today the play is probably the most read and performed of all of Shakespeare's works, and maybe one of the most well-known plays in the world.

# Synopsis: What Happens in *Romeo and Juliet*

The servants of the feuding Capulet and Montague families trade insults on the streets of Verona. The prince of Verona, having grown tired of their continual public brawls, decrees that the next member of either family to provoke a fight will be put to death.

Romeo Montague is infatuated with a girl named Rosaline, so, he and his friends decide to invite themselves to a ball where Rosaline is expected to be present. Unfortunately, the ball is hosted by their sworn enemy, Lord Capulet. In order not to provoke trouble, the young intruders go in disguise. However, all thoughts of Rosaline flee as Romeo falls instantly in love with Juliet, daughter of Capulet, and she with him. In only a moment's time, however, they discover each other's identity. Their love is forbidden.

As Romeo and his friends make their way home, they pass by the home of the Capulets, and Romeo, unable to restrain himself, climbs the garden wall just as Juliet appears on her balcony. They declare their love for one another, seal their love with a kiss and vow to meet the next day.

Romeo turns to his old friend Friar Lawrence and tells him of his intention to marry the daughter of his family's enemy. The friar agrees to marry the young couple as quickly as an opportunity provides itself. Meanwhile, Juliet sends her nurse to make the necessary arrangements, and that afternoon Romeo and Juliet are secretly married in Friar Lawrence's cell.

Romeo soon finds himself in the middle of a fight between Mercutio (his cousin) and Tybalt (Juliet's cousin). He tries to be a peacemaker and put a stop to the fighting, but his interference succeeds only in getting Mercutio mortally wounded. Romeo, furious at the death of his friend and kinsman, challenges Tybalt and kills him. The situation is now desperate, and Romeo turns again to his friend, the friar, who informs him that the prince, having learned of his fight with Tybalt, has banished him to Mantua.

Juliet's nurse arranges for the newlyweds to spend Romeo's last night in Verona together in Juliet's bedroom. Unaware of her marriage to Romeo, Juliet's parents set about arranging her marriage to Paris, a noble kinsman.

The next morning, Romeo leaves for Mantua and a horrified Juliet, learning of the marriage plans, flees to Friar Lawrence, who offers a drug that will give her the appearance of death for two days. He assures her that he will get word to Romeo who will rescue her from the Capulet burial vault and take her to Mantua. She agrees to the plan and takes the potion before going to bed. Juliet's nurse finds her apparently dead the next morning.

Romeo, still in Mantua, hears of Juliet's reported death, but the messenger from Friar Lawrence never arrives to tell him the truth. Distraught with grief, he purchases poison and hurries back to Verona and the tomb. Here, Romeo is confronted by Paris, and, in the ensuing fight, kills him. In the vault, Romeo finds his apparently dead wife, drinks the poison, and dies by her side.

Friar Lawrence arrives just as Juliet awakes and tries to draw her away from the tomb, but flees when he hears voices approaching. Juliet attempts to join her dead husband by drinking the poison he brought but, finding the vial empty, kills herself with his dagger.

The feuding families arrive at the vault to find their children dead. They realize, too late, what their hatred has caused and vow to end the feud. The prince observes that because of their foolish hatred, "all are punished."



# Who's Who in *Romeo and Juliet*

## The Montagues

**Romeo:** Lord and Lady Montague's son, Romeo is initially in love with a girl named Rosaline; but he instantly falls in love with Juliet when he sees her. He is also responsible for the deaths of Tybalt and Paris.

**Montague:** The head of the house of Montague, he is Romeo's father and enemy of Capulet.

**Lady Montague:** Romeo's mother, she dies of grief soon after Romeo's banishment.

**Mercutio:** A temperamental and witty young man related to Prince Escalus, Mercutio is a close friend to Romeo. Tybalt kills him in a fight.

**Benvolio:** Romeo's cousin and friend, Benvolio is usually a peacemaker.

**Balthasar:** Romeo's servant, Balthasar tells Romeo that Juliet is dead.

**Abram:** A servant of the Montagues, Abram is one of the instigators of the fight that begins the play.

## The Capulets

**Juliet:** Daughter of Lord and Lady Capulet, Juliet falls in love with Romeo. Though she is initially very compliant with her family's wishes, she matures and becomes more independent as the play progresses.

**Capulet:** The head of the house of Capulet, he is Juliet's father and enemy of Montague.

**Lady Capulet:** Juliet's mother.

**Nurse:** A talkative and comic woman, the Nurse raised Juliet and loves her very much.

**Peter:** Servant to the nurse and Juliet.

**Tybalt:** Juliet's hot-tempered cousin. He kills Mercutio, and is killed by Romeo.

**Sampson:** Servant of the Capulets, he was among the instigators of the fight that begins the play.

**Gregory:** Servant of the Capulets, he was among the instigators of the fight that begins the play.

## Others

**Friar Lawrence:** A Franciscan friar and close friend to Romeo, Friar Lawrence performs the marriage of Romeo and Juliet and then does everything he can to help them through the rest of the play.

**Paris:** A relative of Prince Escalus, Paris wishes to marry Juliet and Capulet arranges the marriage which doesn't happen before she dies. Romeo kills him in the tomb.

**Prince Escalus:** The prince of Verona, he is related to Mercutio and Paris.

**Friar John:** Another Franciscan friar, he was unable to deliver the message about Juliet's "death" to Romeo.

# *Romeo and Juliet: Family Matters*

By Michael Flachmann

From *Midsummer Magazine*, 1998

*Romeo and Juliet* is, above all, a play about families. From the opening choral prologue which invites us to meet “Two households, both alike in dignity” (prologue.1) to the bloody conclusion where both clans flood into the tomb as witnesses to the lovers’ tragic deaths, Shakespeare emphasizes the often contorted and always intense connection between individuals and the families to which they belong. In fact, one mark of the play’s greatness lies in the way different characters respond to the family pressures which alternately define, nourish, and sometimes suffocate them.

As the word “households” implies, many of the relationships in the play are based on the concept of extended families. The Capulet clan, for example, not only consists of such immediate blood relations as the father, mother, and Juliet, but also casts a wider circle to include Tybalt, the nurse, Peter, Petruchio, and many other assorted relatives and retainers. Like servants who don the livery of their masters, these family members wear their affiliation on their sleeves for everyone to see, much like modern gang members sport colors to identify themselves. Similarly, the Montagues, no less in “dignity,” claim an extensive variety of members in their familial turf.

Although such family affiliation nurtures and protects, it also smothers, which means that hot-bloods like Mercutio and Tybalt must continually press the envelope of social behavior to distinguish themselves as unique members of a common community. The feud persists, in part, because of the desire these younger men have to find identity through rebellion, to repudiate the rival family, and to differentiate themselves from the older and less aggressive members of their own tribes.

Part of the tragedy of the play, therefore, is that Romeo and Juliet must transcend their kindred in order to consummate their love. So long as they are trapped within their respective families, their relationship has little chance of survival. For Juliet, being smothered within the Capulet clan is like awakening in a tomb—a collective body of deceased relatives “whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in” (4.3.34). Surrounded by such stifling kinship, she will “die strangled” (35) unless rescued by her lover. Unfortunately, Juliet’s principal attempt to escape her family through Friar Lawrence’s sleeping potion is marred by a fatalistic lack of initiative that draws her deeper into the morbid embrace of her dead kinsmen. In seeking life with Romeo away from the clutches of her parents, she finds only death within the family burial chamber.

In like fashion, Romeo attempts to separate from his parents and friends in much the same way that Juliet does. As Montague explains to Benvolio at the outset of the play, Romeo “private in his chamber pens himself, / Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out, / And makes himself an artificial night” (1.1.138-140). With Juliet in the famous balcony scene, he willingly agrees to renounce his Montague family name because “it is an enemy to thee” (2.2.56). And in act two, scene four, he admits to giving Mercutio and his other friends “the slip” (48) when they pursued him after the party. All forces in the play, however, conspire to keep Romeo mired within his family. His attempts to “be new baptized” (2.2.50) are thwarted by Mercutio’s death, the nurse’s disloyalty, and the friar’s “osier cage” of “baleful weeds” (2.3.7-8). Even the plague, which keeps Friar John from delivering his fateful letter because he is “sealed up” within an infected town (5.2.11), emblemizes the deadly and claustrophobic nature of family relationships in this play.

Similarly, the desire of Juliet’s father to entice the wealthy and well-connected Paris into the Capulet family is thwarted by his daughter, who like an ill-trained hawk “mewed” in its cage (3.4.11) refuses to snatch up this rich morsel of food to sustain her family. Confronted by Juliet’s apparent suicide in act four, scene five, Capulet thinks immediately of his own loss of progeny when he tells Paris that “Death is my son in law, death is my heir; / My daughter he hath wedded. I will

die / And leave him all” (38-40). The loss of his only child will mean the eventual demise of the family line that defines his very existence. Juliet’s suicide in the tomb in act five, scene three brings death, therefore, not only to herself, but to her entire future “household.”

Like Romeo and Juliet, we must all separate from our families, as the children we used to be grow into the adults we must become. In this play, however, the sin of breaking away proves fatal because of the deadly context into which these young lovers are placed. Beset by feud, plague, dysfunctional relatives, and a sense of isolation, Romeo and Juliet become “poor sacrifices” to the enmity of their elders (5.3.33) through their vain attempt to transcend family for love and kinship for self-identity. The loss of childhood becomes real rather than symbolic, and the cost of leaving the family emphasizes the brevity and fragility of young love just as it confirms the price of revenge in a world where forgiveness has never been a virtue. The deaths of Romeo and Juliet achieve, therefore, a tragic beauty which allows us to see the brilliance of their devotion to each other set within the dark hatred of the family feud. Ironically, in separating from their families, they lose their lives at the exact moment that they find themselves.

# *Romeo and Juliet* and the Sonnet of Love

By Kay Cook

“This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong  
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.”

—Sonnet 73

*Romeo and Juliet* is Shakespeare’s best-known play and, after *Hamlet*, the most frequently performed. Although it is a tragedy of two young adolescents caught in the eddy of their own youthful passion, it is also a tragedy of two young people at the mercy of a feud not of their making and of fateful events over which they have no control. Regardless of our experience with this play, as first-time viewers, as seasoned Shakespeare festival attendees, as scholars and as critics, we have a common response of deep sadness over the senseless deaths of the two young lovers. Regardless of the cause of the tragic events, we are on their side.

There are several ways to think about *Romeo and Juliet*, but recent discussions of the play look at the form and language of love that Shakespeare uses and how his use of one particular form, the sonnet, enhances our sense of the play. By directing our attention to the sonnet qualities in *Romeo and Juliet*, we are able to discern a growing maturity in these two characters, one which, especially in the case of Juliet, belies their untried youth. This article will examine how the sonnet conventions found in *Romeo and Juliet* reflect the play’s stance on young love as well as how Juliet’s resistance to the sonnet reveals a character that allows her to endure the desertion of virtually everyone around her.

The sonnet is a fourteen-line love poem. Perfected by the Italian Petrarch in the fifteenth century, the form followed certain conventions. The subject matter was that of unrequited love. The sonneteer would write a cycle of sonnets dedicated to a woman, his “sonnet lady,” whom he knew only from afar, who was unavailable, whose very presence changed one’s earthly existence into heaven. The fourteen-line sequence was often marked by a reversal, a “turn” between the first eight and the last six lines. Frequently, the turn would move from the physical to the spiritual or from the outward contemplation of the woman to the inner anguish over her unavailability.

Shakespeare himself became a master of the sonnet, having written a total of 154. Like Petrarch, his subject matter was love, but Shakespeare was as innovative with the sonnet as he was with his plays. He wrote of the relationship between the intensity of love and its ephemerality, as in Sonnet 73, quoted above, and of the reality rather than the idealized version of the sonnet lady, as in Sonnet 130: “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.” Clearly, then, his decision to evoke the sonnet and then actually to embed one within the action of *Romeo and Juliet* was a conscious one, intended to draw attention to the way those conventions were at work in the play.

*Romeo and Juliet* begins with a choral sonnet that announces the fate of the “two star-cross’d lovers” (prologue.6; all line numbers are from *The Riverside Shakespeare* [Boston: Houghton-Mifflin], 1974). After the opening scenes that establish the rowdiness and ribaldness of Verona’s youth, Romeo enters. He is in many ways a stark contrast to his companions, especially Mercutio, who have displayed all the energy and crassness associated with adolescent boys. Above all, Romeo is a Petrarchan lover languishing over the unattainable Rosaline: “O, she is rich in beauty, only poor / That, when she dies, with beauty dies her store . . . / She is too fair, too wise, wisely too fair / To merit bliss by making me despair / She hath forsworn to love, and in that vow / Do I live dead that live to tell it now” (1.1.215-216, 221-214).

The contrast of Romeo’s mood with his playful companions and their sexual punning is underscored by his speaking in rhymed couplets as opposed to the mostly free verse that characterizes this scene.

Forswearing love and dragging himself to the Capulet ball, Romeo performs an emotional somersault on first viewing Juliet: “Did my heart love till now? Forswear it sight! / For I ne’er saw

true beauty till this night” (1.5.52-53). Shakespeare proceeds to set their first encounter in the form and content of a sonnet (1.5.93-106) with two remarkable exceptions: the sonnet lady has a speaking voice, and, far from being the aloof and unattainable Petrarchan spirit, she reciprocates Romeo’s passion with her own. In fact, she playfully resists the conceit that compares pilgrims’ hands touching in prayer to lovers’ lips touching in kisses, while not, in fact, resisting the actual kisses that Romeo gives her.

Much has been made of Juliet’s role in this first encounter as well as her subsequent role in the famous balcony scene. In both scenes, states Evelyn Gajowski, “Juliet demands of [Romeo] active engagement” (*The Art of Loving: Female Subjectivity and Male Discursive Traditions in Shakespeare’s Tragedies* [Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992], 33). Quoting Jill Levenson, Gajowski also points out that these scenes mark “the male protagonist’s movement beyond the confines of tradition and his quest into unknown psychological terrain, freed of convention” (32).

Playful and actively involved in the “pilgrim” encounter, Juliet next counters Romeo’s Petrarchan hyperboles with practicality in the balcony scene. Her pointed questions, for example when she asks him “by whose direction foundst thou out this place” (2.2.79), are met with rhapsodic responses: “By love, that first did prompt me to inquire” (2.2.80). But Juliet’s directness wins out as she makes the marriage proposal that requires him turn his Petrarchan rhapsodies into action: “If that thy bent of love be honorable, / Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow” (2.2.143-44). Discussing the numerous allusions to falconry in the play (see 2.2.177, for example), Carolyn E. Brown argues that Juliet plays the falconer in her taming of the falcon, Romeo, by ridding him of his “Petrarchanism” (“Juliet’s Taming of Romeo,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 36:333).

Much has also been made in the play itself and by Shakespeare scholars concerning Juliet’s age; she is not yet fourteen. Current criticism suggests that although Lady Capulet herself was married and had borne her child by the time she was Juliet’s age, Elizabethan women actually married at a much later age, usually between twenty-five and thirty (J. Karl Franson, “Too Soon Marr’d: Juliet’s Age as Symbol in *Romeo and Juliet*,” *Papers on Language & Literature* 3, Summer 1996, 245).

Because the age references recur throughout the course of the play, it is clear that we are intended to take notice of her youth, especially when her father suggests to Paris that she is too young: “Let two more summers wither in their pride, / Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride” (1.2.10-11).

Perhaps it is to make a greater contrast with the world of the adults that Shakespeare places practicality and true passion in the words of a thirteen-year-old. The adults in the play demand that the children live through them. One by one, they abandon Juliet until she is left to her own resources and to the vial of the untested drug given her by Friar Laurence: Romeo, of course, is exiled for his killing of Tybalt; because of her refusal to marry Paris, her parents threaten to disown her and, worse, tell her they wish she were dead; the nurse counsels her to commit bigamy since “Romeo’s a dishclout compared to [Paris]” (3.5.219); and Friar Laurence, rather than admit to the marriage that he performed in hopes of reconciling the two houses, comes up with an elaborate scheme that places Juliet in profound physical and mental danger, a fact that she herself realizes. Further, the friar’s fright at voices approaching the tomb causes him to abandon Juliet in the tomb of her dead ancestors with the body of Romeo. Throughout the chaos that occurs when the tragedy in the tomb is discovered by the outside world, Juliet remains firm and resolute, a stark contrast to the confusion that even spills into the streets of Verona: “For I will not away” (5.3.160). Preferring death to the hostile world around her, she stabs herself with Romeo’s dagger.

Although we see the chastened adults receive their greatest punishment, the deaths of their children, it seems far too great a price to pay for the settling of a feud. Our hearts remain with Romeo and Juliet, who found passion in love rather than in hatred and who matured far beyond their adult role models.

# *Romeo and Juliet:*

## A Tragedy of Pity and Pathos

*Romeo and Juliet* is certainly among the world's greatest plays, and the story of Shakespeare's 'star-crossed' young lovers whose fate is sealed by their quarreling families, the Montagues and the Capulets, is the touchstone fable of romantic love. Love so threatened and fragile is beautiful because it is so brief. Coincidence, chance, unawareness: fate weaves its inexorable pattern against the background of a bitter and deadly feud, working through persons who would never knowingly harm the lovers, but who do so nonetheless. It has been stated that the real tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet* is the lack of a telephone.

The play is not one of Shakespeare's cosmic tragedies like *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, or *Macbeth*. In the Greek concept of the tragic hero as a great personage destroyed by some tragic flaw, referred to as the "Fall of Princes," Romeo has no place. He is merely a young man in love with love, and it is his misfortune that his eye falls upon the beautiful daughter of his father's enemy. All disasters that befall the two families flow from this situation; thus the drama becomes one of pathos and pity rather than the type of soul-purging tragedy Shakespeare came to write in his maturity.

Vivid poetry, likely unsurpassed in lyrical exuberance, contributes to 400 years of audience fascination with the play. The balcony scene (Act II Scene 2) is one of the most famous in all literature; Shakespeare makes essentially complete his own triumph over the most difficult medium of words. Using a variety of rhyme schemes (couplets, octets, sonnets) and reveling in punning, metaphor and wit combat, the play's language grows in intensity to the final scene, wherein apostrophes to death are in one moment of lyrical magnificence welded intimately to our hearts and to our world heritage of quotations.

Shakespeare lifted much of the plot for *Romeo and Juliet* directly from a poem by Arthur Brooke written in 1562. Brooke's poem, in turn, was deeply indebted to Bandel, an Italian novelist. Since no copyright laws existed in Shakespeare's time, such "lifting" was permissible; indeed the Elizabethans expected it.

Popularity of this play has been constant since its first appearance. A printed version appeared in 1597 stating that the play had even then "been often (with great applause) plaid publicly." When the playhouses reopened after the Puritan Revolution, *Romeo and Juliet* was one of the plays selected for revival, and it regained at once its place on the popular stage.

About this time someone prepared an edition with a happy ending in which hero and heroine were saved and lived happily ever after. Two versions, one tragic and one happy, played on alternate nights and spectators could choose whichever suited their moods.

David Garrick produced a vastly influential version of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Drury Lane Theatre in 1748, and Gounod's opera, another "modernization" of Shakespeare's material, appeared in 1867. A 1753 picture from the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, shows Juliet on a balcony. . . this famous staging convention apparently originated at this time; Shakespeare mentions only a window.

In our own time, the Zeffirelli motion picture and the Broadway production of *West Side Story* are well established. In fact, given the realism and visual power of today's media, theatre is challenged to restore concepts that preserve the tragedy of the young lovers in Shakespeare's setting, meanwhile renewing and refreshing our experience with the play.

# *Romeo and Juliet:* A Plot by Any Other Name

By Diana Major Spencer

From Souvenir Program, 1990

How many times do we have to watch *Romeo and Juliet* before they get it right? Just once, couldn't Friar John be on time? Couldn't Juliet wake up just a little sooner? Just once? Or do we need the tragedy to tell us its real story?

*Romeo and Juliet* is the best known love story in Western Civilization. It was told many times before the Bard worked his magic, and it has been told many times since. Aside from its traceable sources and direct descendants, an astonishing number of unrelated works share motifs: ill-chosen lovers, sleeping potion, live entombment and double-death. The first and last of these are common to all the examples below; the second or third also occurs. Shakespeare used all four.

The "ill-chosen lover" theme was defined by a high school student as, "Your parents never like your friends." Sound familiar? I have both used it and been accused of it. An early example of paternal disapproval is the well-known story of Pyramis and Thisbe told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* (c. 10 A.D.), and used twice by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Pyramis and Thisbe are forbidden to associate, so they whisper through a chink in the wall their fathers have built to separate their houses. They promise to meet outside the city walls and thence to run away. Thisbe arrives first and, frightened by a lioness, runs to a cave, dropping her veil behind her. Pyramis finds the veil bloodied by the lioness, and concluding that Thisbe has been devoured, stabs himself. Thisbe returns from the cave, finds the dying Pyramis, and, distraught, falls on his sword. They die in each other's arms.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia's father forbids her love for Lysander, and the young lovers agree to meet outside the city walls and thence to run away. After a night of brilliant confusion in the forest they, presumably, live happily ever after—but not until they've watched Bottom and his friends perform a "rude mechanical" version of *Pyramis and Thisbe*. The "frame" story ends happily; Pyramis and Thisbe, as usual, end disastrously.

Shakespeare found the motif of a sleeping potion to avoid an unwanted marriage in *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, 3,000 lines of uninspired poetry by Arthur Brooke (1562), based on a French novel. The Bard was also familiar with an English prose translation of the same French novel (1567). These English versions culminate a chain of no less than ten novels, plays, poems, adaptations and translations in Italy and France during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The third motif, live entombment, occurred in classical Greece, Christian Rome and nineteenth-century France. Thisbe sought refuge in a cave, though she did not die there, and Antigone and Aida go to their deaths in "vault[s] of stone." The title character of a play by Sophocles (495-405 B.C.), Antigone was born from the unholy union of Oedipus and his mother. Antigone's two brothers have slain each other in battle, and her uncle, Creon, assumes the throne. His first decree forbids the burial of one brother. Antigone defies the edict and performs the necessary burial rites. She is condemned to be "locked living in a vault of stone."

The play concerns personal integrity versus civic duty, and divine prerogative versus human, but Antigone and Creon's son, Haimon, are in love. Haimon runs to the cave to save her and finds that "in the cavern's farthest corner. . . [she] made a noose of her fine linen veil/And hanged herself." Distraught, he stabs himself and dies with Antigone in his arms.

An 1871 opera by Verdi is yet another example of ill-chosen love leading to double-death

in a tomb. Aida, daughter of the Ethiopian king, living in slavery in Egypt, is in love with Radames, leader of the Egyptian armies. As war, love and jealousy intertwine, Aida's father is captured, and Radames helps them to escape. He is accused of treason and sentenced: "Beneath the altar of the offended god, you, living, shall be entombed." As the fatal stone seals Radames in his tomb, Aida emerges from the shadows to join him in their last duet.

What makes this basic story so universal? Do adults and societies impose rules? Do kids defy them and dream up outlandish schemes to outwit them, and sometimes run away? Do they think their love is really strong enough to make everything turn out okay in spite of others' experience—and they'll take incredible risks to prove it? Do we mean to say, "See what happens when you disobey your elders"?

Surely, children choose friends and actions outside their parents' preferences. But do we have to die for it? Probably—a little. Do we really hope the message will get through? Probably not. Perhaps the potion symbolizes our youthful illusion of invincibility. Perhaps the tragedy suggests that our passion for risk and romance is entombed with our youth, that we trade it for children to repeat the cycle.

Have you heard the one about the boy and girl who fell in love at first sight and their parents objected and . . . and . . . and . . .? Just think of how it might have been!



# “More rich in matter than in words”: Rhyme in *Romeo and Juliet*

By Cheryl Smith From *Insights*, 2005

One of Shakespeare’s best loved and most frequently produced plays, *Romeo and Juliet* is arguably the greatest love story ever told. Audiences throughout the centuries have been drawn to the tale of ill-fated lovers, hoping that just once, the letter will reach Romeo in time, but understanding that, if it does, the love story loses its universal appeal. Audiences experience tension as they watch the lovers’ story, and this very tension adds to the experience of the play. Part of what makes *Romeo and Juliet* so appealing, in fact, is the emotional rollercoaster ride audiences embark on from the moment the Prologue is spoken.

Not surprisingly, much of this emotional upheaval is due to the play’s brilliant language, which includes such well-known phrases as “That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet” (2.2.43-4); “Deny thy father and refuse thy name” (2.2.33); and “Parting is such sweet sorrow” (2.2.184). Schoolchildren know the verses spoken by Romeo and Juliet, in part because the timelessness of Shakespeare speaks to the love we all hope to find in our lives. Most audience members are unaware, however, of just how deftly Shakespeare uses language throughout the play. In addition to the masterful way he tells his story, Shakespeare cleverly controls the element of rhyme in the script to manipulate the audiences’ feelings of tension as they watch the play.

Typically, rhyme is a unifying device, artfully tying together words and their speakers through the satisfying sound of verbal repetition. Melodious and agreeable, rhyme is often used to create a harmonious atmosphere, as is evidenced in the countless love poems in which it appears. With this in mind, audiences naturally assume that *Romeo and Juliet*, the definitive play about love, is filled with abundant rhyming episodes that bind the two lovers together. However, this is seldom the case. When audiences expect rhyme to be present, either none exists or it clashes with the action onstage; likewise, when audiences expect a lack of rhyme, it flourishes. Both of these cases create an unconscious tension for viewers of the play.

For example, in Act 3 Scene 1 when Tybalt kills Mercutio, Romeo kills Tybalt, and Romeo flees—the very moment Romeo has sacrificed his life with Juliet for the honor of his friend—the scene shifts into rhyme: *Benvolio*: Hence, be gone away! *Romeo*: O, I am fortune’s fool! *Benvolio*: Why dost thou stay? (3.1.134-135)

Rhyme in this section of the script signals to audiences that Romeo’s actions will unite the two lovers, yet we know this is not the case; Romeo’s actions begin the downfall of his relationship with Juliet. Similarly, when Juliet plans to kill herself after learning of Romeo’s action, she speaks in rhyme: *Juliet*: He made for you a highway to my bed; But I, a maid, die maiden-widowed. Come, cords, come, nurse. I’ll to my wedding-bed, And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead! (3.2.34-137)

As a unifying force, the rhyme suggests Juliet should, in fact, kill herself, never consummating her marriage to Romeo. Instead, the rhyme is pulling Romeo and Juliet apart by coupling it with action antagonistic toward the lovers. Often when strife occurs in the action onstage, rhyme is coupled with it, and this awkward marriage of harmonious rhyme and discordant events unconsciously adds to the tension audiences feel while watching *Romeo and Juliet*. But this conflict also occurs when audiences expect rhyme to appear in the verse and it doesn’t.

When Romeo and Juliet meet (2.1), they do, in fact, share several lines of rhyming verse. However, their scenes afterward contain very little rhyme. In their famous balcony scene—the exciting moment where Romeo and Juliet profess their eternal love for each other—very little of the verse is in rhyme. Some of the most famous lines in the history of theatre come from within this scene. For example: *Juliet*: O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore are thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name! (2.2.32-33) and *Juliet*: What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other word would smell as sweet (2.2.43-44).

In arguably the most romantic scene in the literary cannon of love stories, audiences unconsciously anticipate that rhyme will help join the two lovers together. Rhyme should dominate this scene in order to grant audiences an emotional union, yet only one-tenth of the lines rhyme. Furthermore, following this scene, Romeo and Juliet share very few rhyming lines of verse. Once again, rhyme is absent where it is expected, and the tension between the action and the rhyme contributes to the conflict audiences experience while watching this play.

Rhyme plays a crucial role in *Romeo and Juliet* by adding to the tension audiences experience while watching the play. During scenes where the action of the script brings Romeo and Juliet together, rhyme is obviously absent, and in scenes where actions tear the lovers apart, the dialogue is often saturated with rhyme. Since rhyme is distinctly at odds with the action onstage, audiences naturally feel the tension this clash creates. In fact, because tension is an integral component in this play, rhyme refuses to allow audiences to escape it. From the first scene that uses rhyme to describe the fate of the star-crossed lovers to subsequent scenes that unite the lovers without the use of any rhyme, tension intensifies within audiences to guarantee they never lose sight of the fact that the love between Romeo and Juliet is forever doomed.

# Vocabulary/Glossary Of Terms:

Since *Romeo and Juliet* was written, many words in English have changed their meaning, and some are no longer used. If you remember the slang you used a few years ago, it seems dated. Who now uses the word “groovy”? Shakespeare used the rich vocabulary of his day within his plays. When reading Shakespeare read the line in context of the scene. Try translating the lines into your own words, use today’s vernacular.

**Amerce:** to punish with a fine.

“I’ll *amerce* you with so strong a fine / That you shall all repent the loss of mine.”

— Prince Escalus (3.1.152)

**Aqua vitae:** Latin, “water of life,” strong liquor, whiskey.

“Give me some *aqua vitae*.”

— Nurse (3.2.89)

**Caitiff:** miserable, despicable.

“Here lives a *caitiff* wretch.”

— Romeo (5.1.54)

**Charnel:** a vault for the dead, sepulcher.

“Hid me nightly in a *charnel* house.”

— Juliet (4.1.83)

**Choler:** wrath, anger.

“Patience perforce with willful *choler* meeting makes my flesh tremble.”

— Tybalt (1.5.88)

**Cock-a-hoop:** a state of boastful exultation.

“You will set *cock-a-hoop!*”

— Capulet (1.5.80)

**Countervail:** outweigh, offset.

“Sorrow . . . cannot *countervail* the exchange of joy.”

— Romeo (2.6.4)

**Endart:** to pierce, or shoot with a dart.

“No more deep will I *endart* mine eye.”

— Juliet (1.3.100)

**Fettle:** strengthen, prepare, make ready.

“*Fettle* your fine joints ’gainst Thursday next.”

— Capulet (3.5.153)

**Gadding:** rove, wandering.

“Where have you been *gadding*”

— Lord Capulet (4.2.13)

**Gyves:** shackles, bonds, fetters.

“Like a poor prisoner in his twisted *gyves*.”

— Juliet (2.2.182)

**Hilding:** worthless person, wretch.

“Out on her, *hilding!*”

— Capulet (3.5.68)

**Jocund:** cheerful, helpful.

“*Jocund* day stands on tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.”

— Romeo (3.5.9)

**Mickle:** great, much.

“O, *mickle* is the powerful grace that lies / In herbs.”

— Lawrence (2.3.15)

**Physic:** medicine, healing power.

“Both our remedies within thy help and holy *physic* lies.”

— Romeo (2.3.2)

**Presage:** forewarn, portend.

“My dreams *presage* some joyful news.”

— Romeo (5.1.2)

**Proof:** protected, impervious.

“Look thou but sweet / And I am *proof* against their enmity.”

— Romeo (2.2.73)

**Prorogued:** Postponed, deferred.

“My life were better ended by their hate / Than death *prorogued*.”

— Romeo (2.2.78)

**Ropery:** knavery, saucy tricks.

“[Who] was this that was so full of his *ropery*?”

— Nurse (2.4.74)

**Trencher:** Wooden dish or plate.

“He scrape a *trencher*?”

— Servingman (1.5.2)

# Figurative Language:

Shakespeare uses many types of figurative language like metaphor, simile, and personification. Recognizing when his characters are speaking figuratively helps to understand what they are saying. The famous balcony scene of the play is overflowing with figurative language.

Romeo begins by using the sun as a metaphor for his beloved Juliet:

“It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.  
Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon  
Who is already sick and pale with grief  
That thou her maid art far more fair than she.” (2.2.3–6)

In these same lines Romeo has furthered his metaphor by using personification. He creates for us the idea that the moon is a woman who is “sick and pale with grief,” seemingly jealous of Juliet’s beauty.

Toward the end of the scene, Juliet tries to tell Romeo how much she loves him. She uses the sea as a simile to help him understand:

“My bounty is as boundless as the sea,  
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,  
The more I have, for both are infinite. (2.2.133–136)

# Shakespeare's Language: Prose vs Verse

Many students—and adults, for that matter—find Shakespeare difficult to read and hard to understand. They accuse him of not speaking English and refuse to believe that ordinary people spoke the way his characters do. However, if you understand more about his language, it is easier to understand. One idea that may help is to remember that his plays are written in two forms: prose and verse. In *Romeo and Juliet* prose is less common than verse.

## Prose

Prose is the form of speech used by common, and often comic, people in Shakespearean drama. There is no rhythm or meter in the line. It is everyday language. Shakespeare's audiences would recognize the speech as their language. When a character in a play speaks in prose, you know that he is a lower class member of society. These are characters such as criminals, servants, and pages. However, sometimes important characters can speak in prose. For example, the majority of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is written in prose because it deals with the middle-class. The first scene of *Romeo and Juliet* is written in prose, until Benvolio and Tybalt, the more important and higher born characters in the play, enter:

Abraham: Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

Sampson: No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir.

Gregory: Do you quarrel, sir?

Abraham: Quarrel, sir? No, sir.

Sampson: But if you do sir, I am for you. I serve as good a man as you.

Abraham: No better.

Samson: Yes, better, sir.

Abraham: You lie.

Samson: Draw, if you be men.

*Enter Benvolio*

Benvolio: Part fools! / Put up your swords. You know not what you do.

*Enter Tybalt*

Tybalt: What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds? / Turn thee, Benvolio, Look upon thy death.

Benvolio: I do but keep the peace. Put up thy sword, / Or manage it to part these men with me.

(1.1.44–69)

We can recognize the beginning of this passage as prose. The servants, who have crossed paths in the street, insult each other hoping for, but not wanting to be blamed for, a fight. Their words flow freely, without concern for where the line ends on the page.

## Verse

The verse lines begin when Benvolio enters in an attempt to break up the fight. He is followed by Tybalt, who wants to get in on the action. As with most of Shakespeare's important characters, these two speak in blank verse. It contains no rhyme, but each line has an internal rhythm with a regular rhythmic pattern. The pattern most favored by Shakespeare is iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is defined as a ten-syllable line with the accent on every other syllable, beginning with the second one. The rhythm of this pattern of speech is often compared to a beating heart. Examine Benvolio's final line and count the syllables it contains:

“Or manage it to part these men with me.”

Replace the words with syllabic count:

1-2    3-4    5-6    7-8    9-10

Replace the words with a 'da' sound to hear the heart beat:

da-DA da-DA da-DA da-DA da-DA

Now put the emphasis on the words themselves:

Or-MAN age-IT to-PART these-MEN with-ME

In *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare used prose to create moments of confusion, especially when there is fighting or arguing on stage. Interestingly, Mercutio, the highest born of the leading characters in the play, jumps rapidly between prose and verse. This is perhaps to show his mercurial, or erratic, nature. Whether he is speaking in a rhythmic pattern of dreams and fairies or exchanging biting banter with Romeo, he is a master of wit and never misses an opportunity to "one up" his friends or rivals.

### **An Example of Prose**

Mercutio (upon being mortally wounded by Tybalt): No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world. A plague o' both your houses! Zounds, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death! A braggart, a rogue, a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic! Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm. (3.1.95–102)

### **An Example of Verse**

Friar Laurence (counseling Romeo just before marrying him to Juliet):

These violent delights have violent ends  
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder  
Which as they kiss consume. The sweetest honey  
Is loathsome in his own deliciousness,  
And in the taste confounds the appetite.  
Therefore love moderately. Long love doth so.  
Too swift arrives as tardy too slow. (2.6.9–15)

### **A Verse Scene**

Romeo and Juliet (saying goodbye after their wedding night):

Juliet: Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.

It was the nightingale, and not the lark,  
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear;  
Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate tree.  
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

Romeo: It was the lark, the herald of the morn,  
No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks  
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east.  
Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day  
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.  
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

Juliet: Yond light is not daylight, I know it, I.  
It is some meteor that the sun exhaled  
To be to thee this night a torchbearer

And light thee on thy way to Mantua.  
Therefore stay yet. Thou need'st not to be gone.  
Romeo: Let me be ta'en; let me be put to death.  
I am content, so thou wilt have it so.  
I'll say yon gray is not the morning's eye;  
'Tis but the pale reflex of Cynthia's brow.  
Nor that is not the lark whose notes do beat  
The vaulty heaven so high above our heads.  
I have more care to stay than will to go.  
Come, death, and welcome! Juliet wills it so.  
How is't, my soul? Let's talk. It is not day.  
Juliet: It is, it is. Hie hence, begone, away! (3.5.1–26)



# Evolving English

The English language is in constant change. Just as today we use words such as “cool” and “hot” in ways that were never considered just fifty years ago, so too are the meanings of words from Shakespeare’s time unfamiliar to us. Here are some examples of how we might phrase some of Shakespeare’s words today:

“By and by I come.” — Juliet (2.2.151)

*“Hang on, I’ll be there in a second.”*

“I tell you, he that can lay hold of her / Shall have the chinks.” — Nurse (1.5.117–118)

*“Whoever catches her is going to be swimming in dough.”*

“Examine every married lineament / And see how one another lends content.” — Lady Capulet (1.3.84–85)

*“Check him out. He’s totally hot.”*

“The date is out of such prolixity.” — Benvolio (1.4.3)

*“Nobody talks like that anymore.”*

“If thou art dun, we’ll draw you from the mire / Of—save your reverence—love, wherein thou stickest / Up to thine ears.” — Mercutio (1.4.41–43)

*“Hey, stick in the mud, snap out of it. You are up to your ears in, pardon my French, love.”*

“And then to have a wretched puling fool / A whining mammet, in her fortunes tender.” — Capulet (3.5.185–186)

*“But no, we have a worthless, whimpering idiot, a crybaby, with dumb luck.”*

# Elementary School Discussion Questions

## Compare and Contrast

1. Who is your favorite character and why? Who do you dislike, why?
2. If you were acting in a production of the play, which character would you want to be? Why? Who would you not want to play? Why?
3. Compare *Romeo and Juliet* to the story of Cinderella. Think about how they are similar and different in time frame, characters, settings, and ending.

## Relational

1. Who is to blame for each of these deaths: Mercutio, Tybalt, Paris, Romeo, and Juliet? Is there a real hero or villain?
2. Should Juliet have agreed with her parents to forget Romeo and marry Paris? Is it ever right to disobey?
3. How could the Montagues and the Capulets have settled their problems? What effect does violence have on the feelings of the characters?

## Textual

1. Look at what Juliet says to Romeo about love in 2.2.116–124. Do you think she is wise?
2. What does the prince mean when he says at the end of the play, “All are punished”?
3. The words fate, fortune, and star-crossed appear in the text many times. Also, both Romeo and Juliet say that they have a bad feeling about how things will turn out. Does this mean that they couldn’t change the way things ended? Was it destiny or bad choices that led to their deaths?

## Shakespeare’s World

1. Is fourteen a good age to get married? What did Shakespeare think?
2. What would it be like to see this play at Shakespeare’s theatre, The Globe, in the hot afternoon, standing up, with men playing all the roles (even Juliet)?
3. How do you think Shakespeare would react if he knew that you were learning about his play more than 400 years after he wrote it?

# High School Discussion Questions

## Compare and Contrast

1. Study the characters Benvolio and Mercutio, including the meaning behind their names. What are the differences in their functions, words, and fates in the play?
2. *Romeo and Juliet* is Shakespeare's first tragic love story, being written about 1594. Examine *Antony and Cleopatra*, written about 1607 and another passionate story that ends in a double suicide. How do they relate to each other? How has Shakespeare changed as a writer in thirteen years?
3. Watch the movie *West Side Story*, 1961. How do changes in the character's relationships (i.e. Maria and Bernardo being close siblings instead of cousins and Riff living with Tony's family) and the added problems (i.e. ethnic relations) affect the meaning and feeling of the story?

## Relational

1. At what point in the story did things begin to go wrong? Whose fault was this? Discuss how the choices of the following characters affected the outcome of the play: Romeo, Juliet, Friar Lawrence, Mercutio, Lord Capulet, Tybalt.
2. Were Romeo and Juliet really in love? Romeo only first caught sight of Juliet about an hour or two before they decided to get married; they had only spoken for at most ten minutes. Was their love as Juliet said, "too rash, too unadvised, to sudden"? Can love at first sight be true love?
3. The cause of the "ancient grudge" between the Montagues and the Capulets is never explained. Why do you think Shakespeare chose not to tell us? What do you think might have been the cause? What do you think would have happened had Romeo and Juliet gone to their parents and explained their love and asked their families to work out their differences?

## Textual

1. Read the balcony scene of Act 2 Scene 2. Who is in control of this conversation, Romeo or Juliet? Look for other examples in the text to support your idea of who is the stronger character.
2. In Act 3 Scene 1 who is really responsible for Mercutio's death: Mercutio, who provoked the fight, Tybalt who stabbed him, or Romeo who got between them? How would you stage this as a director?
3. In the Prologue the audience is told how the story will end, "a pair of star-crossed lovers take their life." Does knowing the ending change our reactions as we watch or read the play?

## Shakespeare's World

1. In 1582 at the age of eighteen, Shakespeare married a woman who was several years older than him. She gave birth to a child seven months later. Assuming Shakespeare had personal experience with young and passionate love, what does this play say about his later attitude about twelve years later when he wrote the play?
2. In one of the earliest manuscripts of *Romeo and Juliet* someone wrote *enter Will Kemp* instead of *enter Peter* in Act 4 Scene 5. William Kemp was a popular comedic actor in Shakespeare's troupe, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. What does this tell us about Shakespeare's writing process? How would writing for specific actors affect the types of

characters he wrote?

3. How do you think the actors, all male, would have overcome the challenges of performing this very dramatic script to a widely diverse audience (some very rich and some very poor), in the middle of the day, with no special effects? What would they have to do to keep their attention? How does Shakespeare's arrangement of the action help?

# Activities

## The Missing Letter

Write the letter that Friar Lawrence wrote to Romeo and never got delivered. Then write a new ending to the play assuming that he had received it. Consider that this doesn't necessarily mean that things will end happily.

## You're the Designer:

Create costume designs that show the difference between the Montagues and the Capulets. Pay attention to the meaning or feelings behind the colors you pick. Consider what era you want to set the play in and what impact that will have on the play.

## You're the Director

Safely act out the fight scene between Romeo, Mercutio, and Tybalt. Stage it first showing that it was Tybalt's fault, again to show it as Mercutio's fault, and lastly to show it as an accident.

## You're the Writer

Rewrite Juliet's "Farewell Compliment" speech in the balcony scene (2.2,80–106) in modern language. Try to include several idioms, allusions, and examples of figurative language.

## You're the Actor

Option A: Monologue

Pick a speech of at least ten lines. Repeat the speech using several different techniques. Try it dramatically, angrily, humorously, sarcastically. Try emphasizing different words to change the meaning of the words.

Option B: Dialogue

Pick a bit of dialogue of at least ten lines. Play the scene using several different techniques. Try it dramatically, angrily, humorously, and sarcastically. Try emphasizing different words and swapping roles to change the meaning of the words.

## Queen Mabb

Read Mercutio's Queen Mabb speech (1.4.53–95). Draw a picture of Queen Mabb and write a story of one of her adventures.

## Animal Games

Tybalt is called the "Prince of Cats" by Mercutio. Consider what is catlike about him. Draw or list what animals you would assign to other characters in the play.

## Family Feud

Write or improvise a scene between Prince Escalus, Montague, and Capulet (or their wives) in which they discuss their differences and the cause of the feud and attempt to find a solution.

## Paris

Write or improvise a scene at the feast in which Paris attempts to woo Juliet. How does Juliet feel about him? Does she "look to like if looking liking move"?

# Lesson Plan:

Adapted from a lesson by T. Richards, BC Canada. Found as lesson 5, under lessons at [http://www.geocities.com/trichard\\_ca/](http://www.geocities.com/trichard_ca/) (12 Feb. 2008).

## Title:

“Wisely and Slow. They Stumble That Run Fast.” Time structure in *Romeo and Juliet*

## Objective:

Students will demonstrate their understanding of the chronology of the play by creating a calendar of Romeo and Juliet’s week.

## Materials:

Pen, paper, script of *Romeo and Juliet*

## Age Level:

Middle school to high school

## Anticipatory Set/Hook:

Create a Monday-Friday calendar for the dates July 6-10. Now, imagine you are fifteen years old, and the only child in a very wealthy family. Write your planned activities for the week, including lots of personal details.

## Process:

1. Explain to students that the calendar they have created is what Romeo and Juliet thought would be happening the week that the events in the play took place.
2. Knowing that Lord Capulet sets Juliet’s wedding to Paris for Wednesday we can determine what day the rest of the major events in the play occur on. Discuss the major events of the play and determine where they fall in a timetable. It may look like this:

Sunday:	Capulet and Montague servants fight in the streets. Capulets host a feast. Romeo and Juliet meet and fall in love.
Monday:	Friar Lawrence marries Romeo and Juliet. Tybalt kills Mercutio. Romeo kills Tybalt. The prince banishes Romeo Lord Capulet arranges Juliet and Paris’s wedding for Thursday. Romeo and Juliet spend one night together.
Tuesday:	Romeo flees to Mantua. Juliet learns of her arranged engagement to Paris. Friar Lawrence gives Juliet the potion. Lord Capulet moves the wedding up to Wednesday. Juliet drinks the potion.
Wednesday:	Paris arrives for the wedding. Juliet is found dead. Friar Lawrence attempts to send the letter to Romeo.

Thursday: Romeo learns of Juliet's death and buys poison.  
Romeo returns to Verona.  
Friar Lawrence learns Romeo never got his letter.  
Romeo kills Paris and poisons himself.  
Juliet stabs herself.

Early Friday: The families find the bodies.  
The families make peace.

3. Discuss the implication of this timeline on the play. What is the turning point of the play? (Mercutio's death) How does Shakespeare build tension and suspense in the flow of action? (Beginning with Juliet's fight with her parents all the scenes move quickly. They are broken up by entrances and exits, such as Paris's entrance into Juliet's bedroom or the dialogue with the apothecary.)
4. Have students complete a writing assignment (a paragraph or more) discussing which event on the time line they would change in order to rescue the lovers. This can be written as a first person narrative of how the character changed events, an additional scene with dialogue in modern or Elizabethan language, or an expository paper explaining what they chose to change and why and how they changed it. Every paper should be carefully thought out and offer textual support from the script.

Conclusion: Have students revise their calendar, as Romeo or Juliet would have done to indicate what really happened during the week. They can use single words, pictures, and short sentences. They should reflect the darkening mood of the week.

#### Tools for Assessment:

Assessment occurs throughout this lesson as students:

Complete the assignment of creating their own calendars.

Participate in the discussion of major events/timing in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Participate in the discussion of the implications of the timeline.

Revise their original calendar .

Complete their writing assignment.

Use a normal rubric for grading the writing assignment.