

from Twisted Tales from Shakespeare

by Richard Armour

*How would you recount the events of
Romeo and Juliet to a friend? In this
humorous essay, Armour spoofs
Shakespeare's drama and provides extra
details to enliven this classic story of young
love.*

Introduction

The plot of *Romeo and Juliet* came to England from Italy through France, arriving tired and dusty and covered with hotel stickers. Passed from person to person by word of mouth, it picked up interesting details and several of the more popular diseases of the sixteenth century. As with most of Shakespeare's works, scholars believe this also was preceded by a lost play. Elizabethans never could remember where they left things.

Romeo and Juliet is one of Shakespeare's early works. Microscopic examination of the First Quarto (Q1) reveals no trace of hair, and leads to the assumption that the play was written before Shakespeare grew a beard¹ It unquestionably, perhaps even indubitably, belongs to that period of Shakespeare's life when he

was experimenting with lyricism. The verse has a fluid quality, purple splotches being interspersed with brown puddles where the author gave way to his weakness for liquid syllables.

The style in general is marked by numerous figures of speech—metaphors, semaphors, twongue-tisters, etc. An occasional wordy passage is offset by a passage of equal length in which Shakespeare strips his language bare and uses no words whatsoever. The stark simplicity of these latter passages begs description.²

Shakespeare represents the love of Romeo and Juliet as that of two young people caught in the toils of Fate and unable to help themselves. In that hot Italian summer, passions were high and shirts were damp. Both of the lovers grow in stature as the story unfolds, until by the last act Romeo stands well over six feet in his sandals and Juliet has to let down the hem of her kirtle. At the beginning of the play Romeo and Juliet are callow and impetuous; by the end of the play they are noble, dignified, and dead.

Romeo and Juliet has long been one of the most popular of Shakespeare's plays, enjoyed especially by young people who identify themselves with the two lovers³ and by poets who identify themselves with Shakespeare. The balcony scene has been played all over the world, except possibly in regions where there are only one-story houses. If the part of Juliet has sometimes overshadowed that of Romeo, it is because Romeo spends so much time under the balcony.

¹ The First Quarto is known as a "bad" quarto, although we are not told what it did to get this reputation.

² And, if long continued, might have impoverished the author.

³ Young men tend to identify themselves with Romeo and young women with Juliet.

A family feud

The play opens with a Prologue which tells the whole story and makes it unnecessary to go any further.⁴ It seems that in the Italian city of Verona a feud is going on between the Montagues and the Capulets, it being the height of the feudal period. What made the Montagues mad at the Capulets and vice versa is not explained. Evidently it's something that happened so long ago that nobody can remember, like Yale and Harvard. Anyhow, there's no feud like an old feud, and no one likes to upset a Tradition.

Since the Montagues and the Capulets carry swords and fight at the drop of a pizza, those red spots on the pavement really *are* blood. Hot-headed young fellows are always running swords through one another. "Draw!" they shout, which is the signal to pull their swords out of each other and look to see who made the larger hole.

Escalus, the Prince of Verona, is getting sick of all this bloodshed. Every time someone is killed, he loses a taxpayer.

"What, ho! you men, you beasts," he cries, making sure to include everyone. He warns Montague and Capulet that this brawling has to stop, or they will forfeit their own lives. This puts a new complexion on things.⁵

"If there is any fighting from now on," Montague and Capulet promise, "it will be over our dead bodies." Escalus nods approvingly.

⁴ Anyone continuing is warned to look out for "the two hours' traffic of our stage," with dozens of Italians careening crazily to and from the wings.

⁵ I.e., they turn pale.

Romeo meets Juliet

Romeo, the son of Montague, is a handsome young fellow who is in an advanced stage of lovesickness for a girl named Rosaline. He sighs all day long, and is getting short of breath.⁶ At night he can hardly wait to get to sleep so he can start dreaming. But Rosaline cares for him not a whit.

Hoping to make him forget Rosaline, two swash-buckling friends of his, Benvolio and Mercutio, persuade him to crash a party at the Capulets'. Since Romeo and Benvolio are Montagues, they don masks, hoping to be mistaken for burglars.

Old Capulet's daughter, Juliet, is the most luscious damsel at the party. When Romeo casts eyes on her, she playfully tosses them back. He feels an electric shock run through him, even though the place is lit by torches, and forgets Rosaline completely.⁷

"It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear," remarks Romeo, who is a quick man with a simile, no matter how ridiculous. In a short while he has made her acquaintance, and before the evening is over has worked up to a kiss.⁸

"You kiss by the book," Juliet comments. Seems she has read the same how-to opus and recognizes the system. She puckers up again, ready to move on to the next chapter.

Tybalt, a young Capulet who hates the Montagues' guts, which he is always spilling into the gutter,

⁶ "Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs," he says, his head in the clouds.

⁷ In fact the poor girl is never heard of again, thus missing her chance for immortality in what might have been Shakespeare's *Romeo and Rosaline*.

⁸ He worked up from her neck to her lips, and hoped he hadn't gone too far.

recognizes Romeo by the way he smacks his lips.

"Fetch me my rapier, boy," he says to his caddy, passing up his broadsword and his eight iron. He is about to run Romeo through when he is stopped by old Capulet.

"Let him alone," Capulet says brusquely. Then, when Tybalt tries to argue, he shouts, "Go to!" Tybalt goes, although his destination is unspecified.⁹

At last Juliet's mother calls her, and Juliet withdraws.¹⁰

Later that night Romeo learns from Benvolio that Juliet is a Capulet, and Juliet learns from her nanny that Romeo is a Montague.

"I love a loathed enemy," says Juliet, who is only fourteen and a crazy, mixed-up Capulet.

As for Romeo, despite all that osculation he's none too sure of himself. After all, Juliet has never seen him without his mask on.

Romeo goes back for more

Later that night Romeo gives his friends the slip and climbs over the wall into the Capulets' orchard. ("Leaps the wall," the text says, but Shakespeare was inclined to exaggerate.) He has a wonderful chance to purloin some fruit, but passes it up when he sees Juliet standing on her bedroom balcony in her negligee, looking neglected. At sight of her, Romeo goes slightly daft, mumbling about putting her eyes in the sky and replacing them with stars, probably two of the smaller ones.

⁹ Shakespeare's two favorite devices for removing characters from the stage are "exeunts" and "go to's."

¹⁰ Her lips.

"O that I were a glove¹¹ upon that hand, that I might touch that cheek!" he exclaims, getting more and more impractical.

Juliet, who has an extraordinary sense of smell, realizes that Romeo is in the vicinity. "O Romeo, Romeo!" (probably a misreading of "Aromeo, aromeo") she cries out. "Wherefore art thou at, Romeo?" And then, lest he take offense, she hastily adds, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

As Romeo gazes hungrily at her, Juliet becomes embarrassed. "Thou know'st the mask of night is on my face," she explains, chagrined at being caught with her cold cream on. But in the pale, moonlight, Romeo seems not to have noticed this.

They converse until almost morning, Juliet leaning from her balcony and Romeo pacing about underneath. At last she retires, chilled to the bone, and Romeo goes home with a crick in his neck.

Romeo and Juliet elope

Early the next morning Romeo calls on his friend, Friar Laurence, who is already up and puttering about in his garden, gathering a basketful of weeds for breakfast. "O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies in plants, herbs, stones," he mutters to himself as he works. Mickle, it appears, is a rare substance, rich in vitamins.

"Good morrow, Father," Romeo greets him casually, as if he too were an early riser instead of one who hasn't been to bed. Forthwith he asks the priest to arrange a little marriage ceremony. When Friar Laurence learns that the bride-to-be is Juliet, he is delighted, it being something of a feather in his

¹¹ In view of Juliet's age, it would have to be a kid glove.

tonsure to marry a Montague and a Capulet.

At this point the plot is considerably helped by Juliet's nurse, a talkative old Cupidess who is always shuffling on and off stage, carrying notes. Apparently she is a practical nurse, with a special permit from the Postal Department.

Thanks to her efforts, Juliet meets Romeo at Friar Laurence's cell and they become mates.¹² Getting married in those days was simple. There were no questionnaires, no blood tests, no fingerprints. Moreover, a minor like Juliet didn't have to get her parents' consent, which was a good thing in this instance.

Juliet, now Mrs. R. Montague, goes back to her balcony. The nurse smuggles in a rope ladder which will be dropped that night as soon as Romeo arrives with a new soliloquy. It's not the most auspicious beginning for a marriage, but Romeo will soon be learning the ropes.

Some unfortunate swordplay

Tybalt, a hot-headed Capulet, is spoiling for a fight. It's a warm day, and, with no refrigeration, nothing keeps very well. Meeting Benvolio and Mercutio in the public square, Tybalt stands fast¹³ and exchanges insults with them, at the current rate. But he is really much more interested in insulting Romeo, who at this moment arrives.

"Thou art a villain," Tybalt snarls unsmilingly. This is pretty strong language, and Romeo should take umbrage.¹⁴ But, remembering that he is now related to

¹² Cellmates.

¹³ This is done by marking time at the double.

¹⁴ Perhaps he does, deep down inside where it isn't visible.

Tybalt by marriage, he replies politely. He realizes that you have to put up with a good deal from in-laws.

"Tybalt, you rat-catcher!"¹⁵ Mercutio says colorfully, whipping out his sword.

"I am for you!" cries Tybalt, trying to mix him up, really being against him.

As they fight, Romeo steps between them, his courage matched only by his stupidity. Tybalt thrusts under Romeo's arm and stabs Mercutio and flies. We are not told what happened to the flies, but Mercutio is in a bad way.

"I am hurt," he groans, in one of the greatest understatements in all Shakespeare.

"Courage, man, the hurt cannot be much," says Romeo, who fails to notice that his friend is standing up to his ankles in blood.

Not until Mercutio is dead does Romeo appreciate the seriousness of the situation. Then he vows to get back at Tybalt¹⁶ for his underhanded underarm thrust. Completely forgetting about Tybalt's being a relative on his wife's side, Romeo unsheathes, feints, parries, and thrusts. "Tybalt falls," we are told, and in a Shakespearean tragedy this usually means he is dead, which turns out to be the case.

Romeo could be executed for this act of passion, but Benvolio pleads with the Prince, who lets Romeo off easy, merely banishing him for life. To a home-town boy, who believes there is no place like Verona, this is the end.¹⁷

¹⁵The equivalent of the modern dog-catcher, or man-with-thenet. Anyhow, it's good to know that Tybalt is employed.

¹⁶Who has returned to the scene, probably to retrieve his sword, which he left sticking in Mercutio.

¹⁷There are, however, three and a half acts still to come.

Things are a mess

That night Juliet is waiting impatiently for Romeo to come climbing up the rope, hand over hand, and ready to hand over herself. She thinks happily of their life together, and dreams up an unusual way to memorialize her husband.

"When he shall die," she muses sentimentally, "take him and cut him out in little stars."¹⁸ I Apparently she can see herself with a cookie cutter, and bits of Romeo all over the place. She has quite an imagination.

Just then the Nurse arrives with the news that Romeo has killed her kinsman, Tybalt, and been banished. At first Juliet shrieks piteously to learn that Tybalt has been slain, and by her husband of all people. She ransacks her vocabulary for suitable epithets to describe Romeo.

"O serpent heart, hid with a flowering face!" she screams, remembering the time he wriggled up the trellis with ' -a 'long-stemmed rose in each nostril.

But her mood changes. A shudder goes through her frame. She blanches, clutches her breast, and staggers upstage left.

"Some word there was, worsen than Tybalt's death," she says to the Nurse, lapsing into the grammar of her age.¹⁹ Before the Nurse can tell her what it was, she remembers. It was "banished." The tears gush forth more violently than ever, but now in Romeo's direction. After all, she has several cousins but only one husband. Subsiding, Juliet tells the Nurse to give Romeo a ring. Since there are no telephones, the poor old soul has to shuffle the weary miles to Friar Laurence's cell, where Romeo is hiding.

¹⁸See what Romeo wanted to do with Juliet's eyes. They both have star fixations.

¹⁹Fourteen.

Romeo is blue about his banishment,²⁰ but cheers up when the Nurse arrives with word that Juliet still loves him, though he must promise never to do anything like that to Tybalt again. He is further cheered when the Friar says that if he will lie low in Mantua for a while, the news of his marriage can be broken gently to old Capulet, who will welcome his son-in-law back with open arms.²¹ Friar Laurence is president of the Optimist Club of Verona.

Romeo returns for one almost idyllic night with Juliet before he hies himself to Mantua. It might have been perfect, indeed, but for a small disagreement. They hear a bird singing, and Juliet says it's a nightingale in a pomegranate tree, while Romeo insists it's a lark in the poison ivy. They argue about this until dawn, and Romeo might have been caught with his ladder down had not the Nurse come in.

"The day is broke," she announces, slaughtering the King's Italian. Romeo takes one last kiss (for the road) and is on his way to Mantua.

Just as things seem to be taking a turn for the better, Juliet gets some bad news. Her mother brings word that she is to marry the County Paris next Thursday.

Juliet is aghast, and feels very little better when she learns that County Paris is only one man. She vows she will not marry him, come Hell or high water, both of which at the moment seem unlikely. What does come is her father, old Capulet, and when he hears that Juliet won't have Paris, he is furious.

"You baggage!" he cries, swearing he will put handles on her and carry her to church himself, if

²⁰ And not helped any by the good Friar's remark, "Thou art wedded to calamity," a tactless thing to say to a bridegroom, whatever he may think of the bride.

²¹Firearms, perhaps.

necessary. Then he gets even uglier. "I will drag thee on a hurdle thither."²²

"Fie; fie!" interjects Lady Capulet, whose language is refined and monosyllabic.

"You green-sickness carrion! You tallow-face!"²³ Capulet shouts, reaching a crescendo of paternal enthusiasm, and more than a little proud of his vocabulary. "Fettle your fine joints 'gainst Thursday next," he says, thinking some deep-knee bends might limber her up. Finally he storms out in a high dudgeon, pulled by two white horses, maintaining that Juliet must marry Paris or else. The alternative is too terrible to relate.

"Do as thou wilt," says Lady Capulet, washing her hands of the affair, and toweling briskly.

But does Juliet wilt? No. She has a lot of spunk, that girl. Things look black, but she will go to Friar Laurence. *He* will know what to do.

A desperate plan

It is now Tuesday, and time is short. If something isn't done by Thursday, Juliet will have two husbands and will be twice as nervous as the usual bride.

But the good Friar has a plan. It is long and intricate and he has obviously been working on it for days, when he should have been praying or gathering weeds.

"Take thou this vial," he tells Juliet. When she goes to bed Wednesday night, if she will swallow "the distilling liquor,"²⁴ it will make her stop breathing, turn cold, and look as good as dead. "The roses in thy lips and cheeks

²²He doesn't specify high hurdle or low, but either would do.

²³Juliet still hasn't removed that cold cream.

²⁴The Friar does a little medicinal moonshining in back of the cloister.

shall fade to paly ashes," he says, "and thy eyes' windows fall." He can see it vividly, even the little shutters in front of her eyes, and is in an ecstasy of ghoulisn delight.

On Thursday morning, the Friar continues, Paris will come to her bedroom to rouse her and, thinking her deceased, change his mind about marriage. She will then be borne on a bier to the Capulet vault and left to become one of the family skeletons. After forty-two hours (so it says on the label), the effect of the medicine will wear off and Juliet will wake up without even a hangover. Meanwhile the Friar will have posted an epistle to Romeo, explaining the whole complicated business, and Romeo will be right there in the vault²⁵ when Juliet awakens, and can carry her off to Mantua.

It's a gruesome scheme, but Juliet is not to be outdone when it comes to thinking up macabre ideas.

"O, bid me leap from off the battlements, chain me with roaring bears, or shut me nightly in a charnelhouse," she beseeches the Friar. But he thinks his plan is preferable, having more confidence in poisons.

Juliet trudges homeward, clutching the vial in her hot little hand. Because of her youth, she is unaware that the traditional way to get rid of an unwelcome suitor is to give *him* the poison.

The denouement (how it comes out)

At first everything goes as planned. Juliet shakes well before using, takes a deep draught, and falls on the bed senseless, without even time to slip out of her street clothes. In the morning the Nurse tries to wake

²⁵Watch in hand, counting off the seconds. from

her and discovers she is sleeping the Long Sleep.²⁶

Lamentation ensues.

"O day! O day!" cries the Nurse.

"O child! O child!" cries Capulet.

"O love! O life" cries Paris, with a little more variety.

The only good thing about the whole affair, as the Father of the Bride²⁷ observes, is the fact that the flowers ordered for the wedding will do very nicely for the funeral.

So Juliet, in her burying clothes, is stowed away in the family vault with Tybalt and sundry other decomposed kinfolk. Pale though she is, she's the best-looking thing in the place.

But now matters go awry. The friar whom Friar Laurence sent "with speed to Mantua" either was arrested for speeding or took a wrong turn. Anyhow, word fails to reach Romeo about Juliet's true condition. He hears that she is dead, and forthwith rushes out and buys some poison of his own. His idea is to imbibe it in the Capulet burial vault, so that at least he can have the pleasure of being dead in the same place with Juliet.

However, when he gets to the tomb and pries his way in with "an iron crow" (either a misprint for "crowbar" or a mighty tough bird), he finds Paris already there. Paris came not to die but to bring flowers, but Romeo changes all that with a few thrusts of his sword. Some of Shakespeare's best dialogue ensues.

ROMEO. Have at thee, boy. [*They fight.*]

PARIS. O, I am slain! [*Falls.*]

Thereupon he dies (also in square brackets), and

²⁶But athwart rather than lengthwise.

²⁷Henceforth referred to as the Father of the Corpse.

Romeo turns back to the business at hand. "Here will I remain," he remarks gloomily to the prettiest corpse, "with worms that are thy chamber-maids." The picture conjured up, of worms bustling about with little white caps on their heads, dusting the ledges, is one of Shakespeare's most masterful.

Then, sealing Juliet's lips with a kiss, to keep them watertight, he quaffs the poison and is dead even before he can make a long speech.²⁸

Just after the nick of time, Friar Laurence arrives with a lantern, another of those iron crows, and a spade. At the same time (exactly forty-two hours, to the second) Juliet awakens refreshed. Seeing the bodies of Paris and Romeo, and figuring everything out at a glance, she snatches up Romeo's dagger.

"O happy dagger!" she says as she thrusts the lucky blade into her bosom. "This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die." As soon as she can arrange her robe tastefully and fold her hands in the approved manner, she expires. The Friar might have saved her had he not been momentarily distracted by the arrival of the Watch, a large crowd of people who like to stare intently at anything gruesome.

Shortly the tomb is full of sightseers and well-wishers. In a moment of generosity, Montague promises to have a solid-gold statue of Juliet erected in the town square, thereby reminding American tourists of what put Verona on the map.

It's too bad about Romeo and Juliet, but anyhow Montague and Capulet bury the hatchet.²⁹ They exeunt arm in arm, hand in glove, and tongue in cheek.³⁰

²⁸This is the only valid internal evidence that Shakespeare might not have written this play.

²⁹And not, as might have been anticipated earlier, in each other.

³⁰Legend has it that they went into business together, selling postcards and souvenirs.