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ROMEO & JULIET

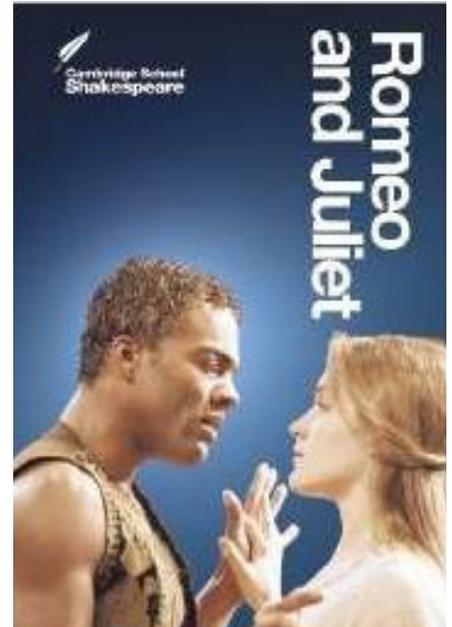
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



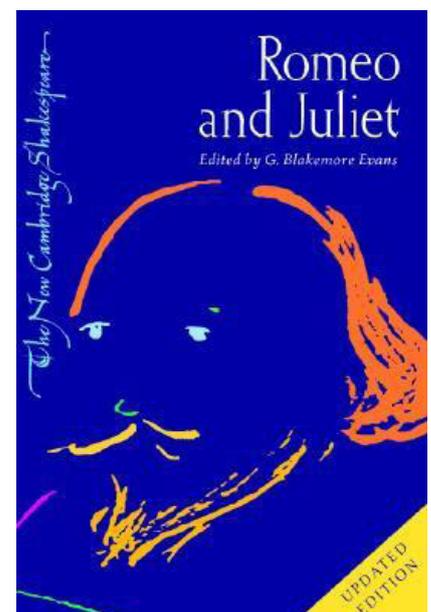


INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's tale of the 'star-crossed' adolescent lovers, *Romeo and Juliet*, is probably his most famous tragedy. His main inspiration for the story was from Arthur Brooke's poem *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, which was written in 1563. Many details of the plot are taken directly from this poem, which brought the story to the attention of the English-speaking world. However, Brooke himself wasn't the originator of the story. He was inspired by adaptations of adaptations of the story, written over 100 years in various languages. It is, of course, what Shakespeare then did with the story that turned it into what is universally accepted as Western culture's archetypal tragic love story. This included his use of language, condensing the timeline into four days and the introduction of key characters, such as Mercutio. The writings of the academics, Marlowe, Greene, Lyly, Kyd, and Peele, defined the London theatre of the 1580s. Though grounded in medieval roots, these men produced new dramas and comedies using Marlowe's styling of blank verse. Shakespeare outdid them all; he combined the best traits of Elizabethan drama with classical sources, enriching the mixture with his imagination and wit.



This trail of inspiration and adaptation continued on from *Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, from orchestral works such as Berlioz's dramatic symphony (1839) and Tchaikovsky's fantasy overture (1880), to Prokofiev's ballet (1938), to the popular, Tony and Academy award-winning musical, *West Side Story* (Broadway Musical: 1957, Film: 1961). The latter might be a useful hook for students' interest and prior knowledge of the plot summary and themes.





The Elizabethan era brought with it a vast demand for new entertainment. Written around the same time as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet* would have been produced immediately following the completion of writing the script. The first performance is largely thought to have taken place between 1594 and 1595, when the playhouses had reopened for the first time, after a sustained outbreak of the plague. Shakespeare emphasises the relevance of the plague for his audience, by using it in the play itself, as the reason for Friar John failing to reach Romeo in Mantua. The play was first performed by The Lord Chamberlain's Men, and the first Romeo was probably the company's leading actor at the time, Richard Burbage, with Master Robert Goffe as the first Juliet. Today, it is most certainly one of Shakespeare's most performed plays.

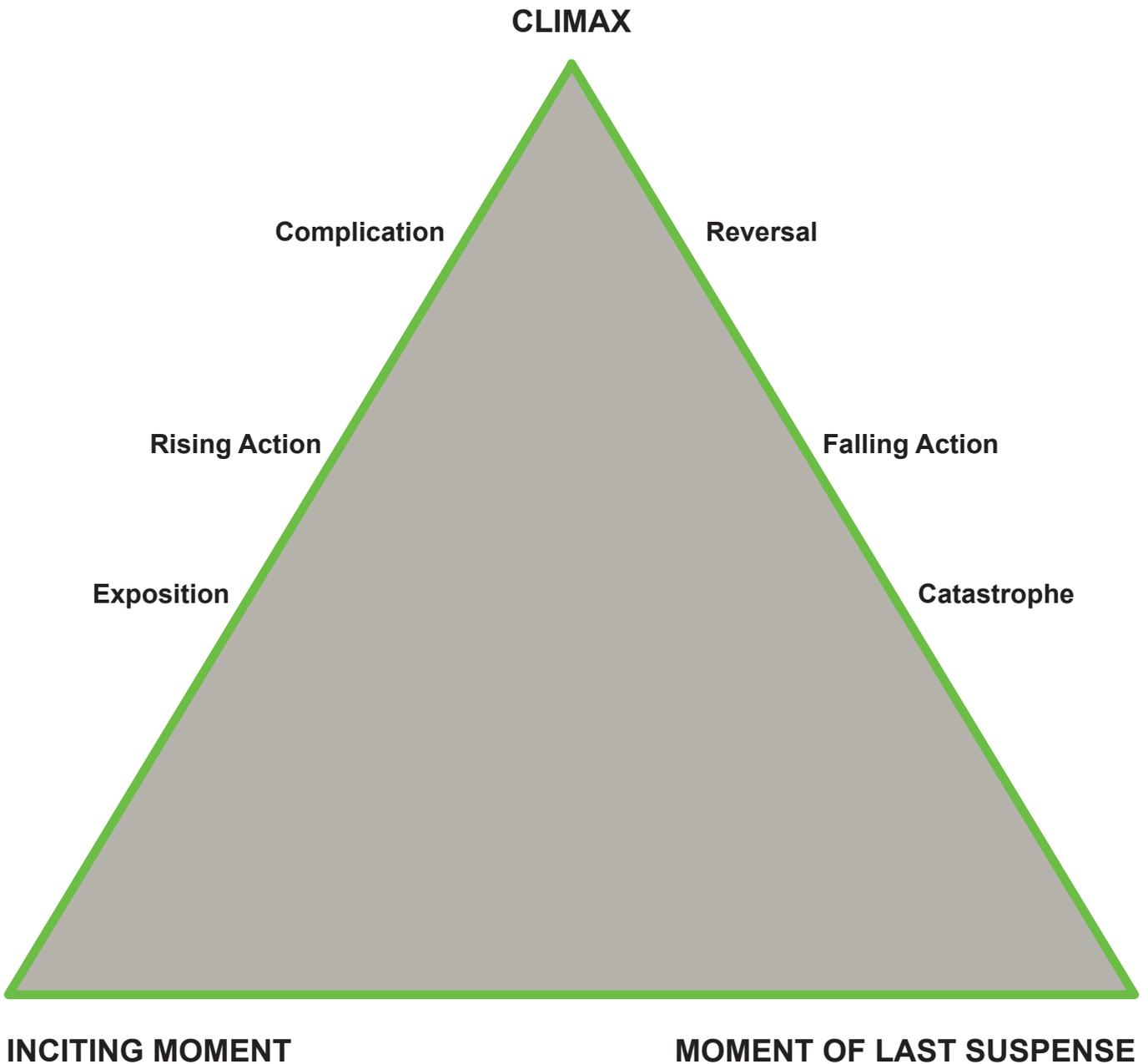
STRUCTURE OF A TRAGEDY

To understand the structure of *Romeo and Juliet*, it might be helpful to look at the classical roots that Shakespeare would have drawn influence from. Aristotle defines tragedy as, 'The imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself'. A tragedy incorporates incidents surrounding fear and those which provoke pity. Often in the form of a tragic hero, where he is given a shift of fortune from happiness to misery, because of a misunderstanding or a mistaken act. In *Romeo*, we have a perfect example of a tragic hero – he is trapped in a situation which he cannot win. This could be further extended to Juliet also. Tragedy can be broken down into seven elements:

- **The conclusion is catastrophic.**
- **The catastrophic conclusion will seem inevitable.**
- **It occurs, ultimately, because of the human limitations of the protagonist.**
- **The protagonist suffers terribly.**
- **The protagonist's suffering often seems disproportionate to his or her culpability.**
- **Yet the suffering is usually redemptive, bringing out the noblest of human capacities for learning.**
- **The suffering is also redemptive, in bringing out the capacity for accepting moral responsibility.**



The structure of tragedy can be seen more clearly in Freytag's Pyramid of Tragedy:





In tragedy, the plot generally has the following structure:

EXPOSITION:

This is usually all or most of Act One. The exposition introduces the characters, their positions and circumstances. Shakespeare usually begins a play with a short scene, often full of activity. In *Romeo and Juliet*, this is Scene 1, where there is a brawl between factions of the Montague and Capulet households. Then, having captured our attention, he proceeds to conversations that provide a lot of information, accompanied by little action. The characters often talk about the central character, before he or she appears.

- **Setting: Verona Italy, 16th or 17th century.**
- **Characters: Capulets and Montagues, specifically, Romeo and Juliet.**
- **Conflict: The Montagues and Capulets are feuding.**

RISING ACTION:

Introduces the conflict and builds tension (usually Act II). This portion of the play focuses on the hero and his decisions, or lack thereof. There is hope at this point.

- **Romeo and Juliet fall in love, but cannot be together because their families are feuding. They decide to get married in secret.**



CLIMAX:

The high point in the hero's fortune. Here, he meets with his first serious defeat, after which, his fortune is on the downgrade (usually Act III).

- **After they gate-crash the Capulet party, Tybalt goes after the Montague faction and kills Mercutio.**
- **To avenge his friend, Romeo duels with and kills Tybalt – Juliet's cousin.**
- **Romeo is banished, but before he goes, he and Juliet share a proper wedding night.**

FALLING ACTION:

The opposing force takes over and becomes more prominent than the hero. In Act Four, Shakespeare often introduces a new kind of emotion, a quiet, pathetic emotion that is usually painful.

- **Juliet's parents arrange a marriage for her to Paris.**
- **She and the Friar have an elaborate plan to get her out of a second marriage, by faking her death. Part of this plan is that Romeo will receive a letter saying she's not dead, so that he can be there when she wakes, and they can live happily ever after.**
- **Romeo – never having received the letter – thinks Juliet has died (this is prime example of dramatic irony).**
- **Romeo buys poison and goes to her tomb to commit suicide.**



CATASTROPHE:

This is generally all, or most, of Act V. It involves a total reversal of the protagonist's fortunes. In Shakespeare's tragedies, the reversal always results in the death of the character, which is usually a brighter prospect for him/her, than living in disgrace.

- **Romeo confronts Paris at Juliet's tomb, slaying him before taking his own life.**
- **Juliet awakens from her sleeping potion to see Romeo has committed suicide.**
- **She takes his dagger and kills herself.**
- **The Friar and Nurse explain to the Capulet and Montague families, that the two lovers were married in secret.**
- **Both families are saddened by the situation and vow to end their long-standing feud.**

CHARACTERS

ROMEO

The son and heir of Lord and Lady Montague. A young man of about sixteen, impulsive and immature, his idealism and passion make him an extremely likable character. He lives in the middle of a violent feud between his family and the Capulets, but he is not at all interested in violence. His only interest is love. At the beginning of the play he is madly in love with a woman named Rosaline (whom we don't see in the play), but the instant he lays eyes on Juliet, he falls in love with her, and forgets Rosaline. Thus, Shakespeare gives us every reason to question how real Romeo's new love is, but Romeo goes to extremes to prove the seriousness of his feelings. He secretly marries Juliet, the daughter of his father's worst enemy; he happily takes abuse from Tybalt; and he would rather die than live without his beloved.



JULIET

The daughter of Capulet and Lady Capulet. A beautiful thirteen-year-old girl, Juliet begins the play as a naïve child who has thought little about love and marriage, but she grows up quickly, upon falling in love with Romeo, the son of her family's great enemy. Because she is a girl in an aristocratic family, she has none of the freedom Romeo has to roam around the city, climb over walls in the middle of the night, or get into swordfights. Nevertheless, she shows amazing courage in trusting her entire life and future to Romeo, even refusing to believe the worst reports about him, after he gets involved in a fight with her cousin. Juliet's closest friend and confidant is her Nurse.

FRIAR LAWRENCE

A Franciscan friar, friend to both Romeo and Juliet. Kind, civic-minded and always ready with a plan, Friar Lawrence secretly marries the lovers in hope that the union might eventually bring peace to Verona. As well as being a Catholic holy man, Friar Lawrence is also an expert in the use of seemingly mystical potions and herbs.

MERCUTIO

One of the most extraordinary characters in all of Shakespeare's plays, Mercutio overflows with imagination, wit and wordplay. He can be quite hot-headed, and hates people who are affected, pretentious, or obsessed with the latest ideals or fashions. He finds Romeo's romanticized ideas about love tiresome, and tries to convince Romeo to view love as a simple matter of appetite. It is widely thought that it is his death, in Act 3, is the turning point towards tragedy. '*A plague o' both your houses*' is the curse he utters, as he lies mortally wounded, and is one of the most famous quotations from the play.



THE NURSE

Juliet's nurse, the woman who has cared for Juliet her entire life. A vulgar, long-winded, and sentimental character, the Nurse provides comic relief, with her frequently inappropriate remarks and speeches. But, until a disagreement near the play's end, the Nurse is Juliet's faithful confidante and loyal intermediary in Juliet's affair with Romeo. She provides a contrast with Juliet, given that her view of love is earthy and sexual, whereas Juliet is idealistic and intense. The Nurse believes in love, and wants Juliet to have a nice-looking husband, but the idea that Juliet would want to sacrifice herself for love, is incomprehensible to her.

TYBALT

A Capulet, Juliet's cousin on her mother's side. Vain, fashionable, supremely aware of courtesy and the lack of it, he becomes aggressive, violent, and quick to draw his sword when he feels his pride has been injured. Once drawn, his sword is something to be feared. He loathes Montagues.

CAPULET

The patriarch of the Capulet family, father of Juliet, husband of Lady Capulet, and enemy, for unexplained reasons, of Montague. He truly loves his daughter, though he is not well acquainted with Juliet's thoughts or feelings, and seems to think that what is best for her, is a 'good' match with Paris. Often prudent, he commands respect and propriety, but he is liable to fly into a rage when either is lacking.

LADY CAPULET

Juliet's mother, Capulet's wife. A woman who herself married young (by her own estimation, she gave birth to Juliet at close to the age of fourteen), she is eager to see her daughter marry Paris. She is an ineffective mother, relying on the Nurse for moral support.



MONTAGUE

Romeo's father, the patriarch of the Montague clan and bitter enemy of Capulet. At the beginning of the play, he is chiefly concerned about Romeo's melancholy.

LADY MONTAGUE

Romeo's mother, Montague's wife. She dies of grief, after Romeo is exiled from Verona.
Paris – A kinsman of the Prince, and the suitor of Juliet most preferred by Capulet. Once Capulet has promised him he can marry Juliet, he behaves very presumptuous toward her, acting as if they are already married.

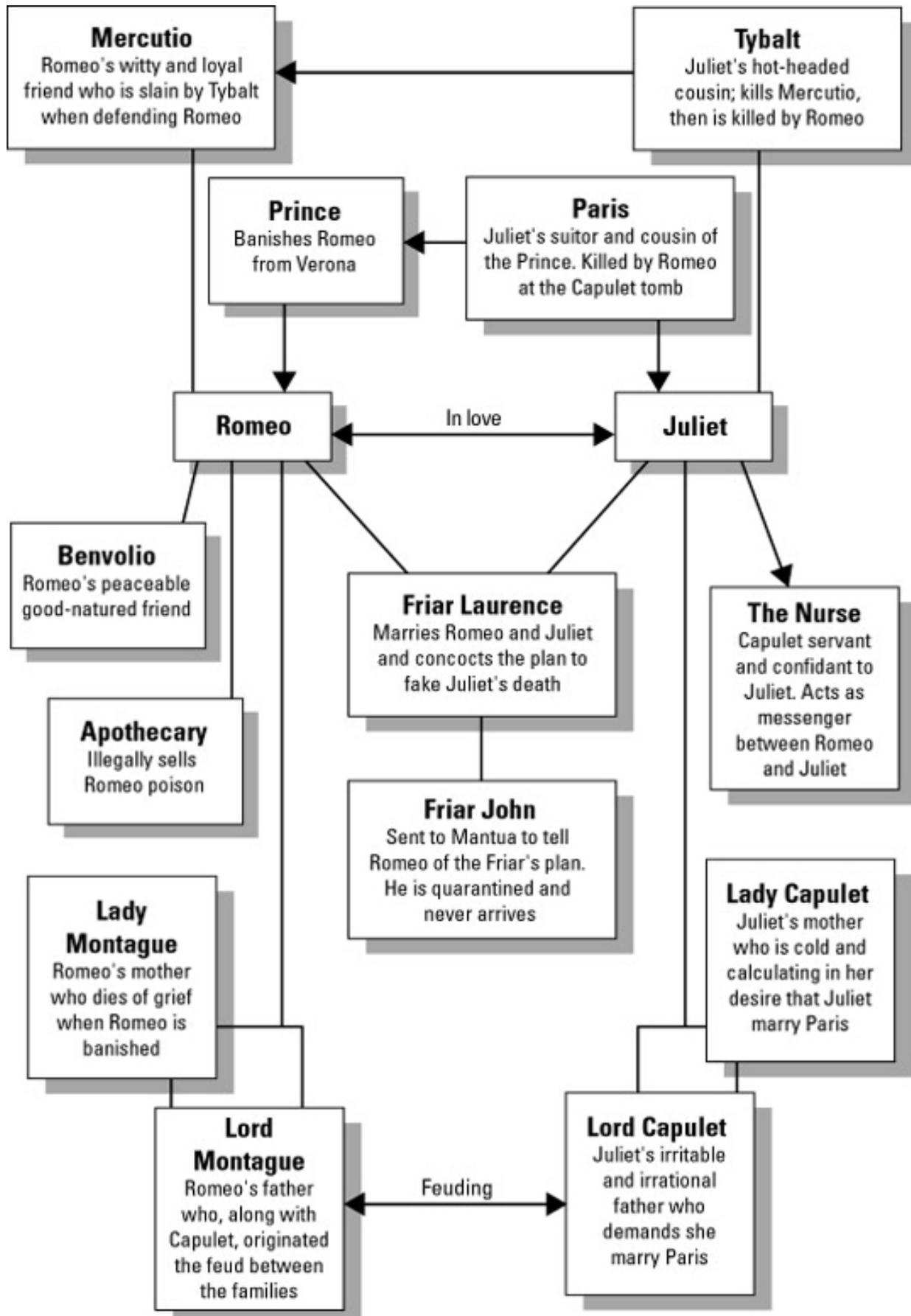
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BENVOLIO

Montague's nephew, Romeo's cousin and thoughtful friend, he makes a genuine effort to defuse violent scenes in public places, though Mercutio accuses him of having a nasty temper in private. He spends most of the play trying to help Romeo get his mind off Rosaline, even after Romeo has fallen in love with Juliet.

ROMEO & JULIET By William Shakespeare





KEY THEMES/ISSUES

As with all of his plays, Shakespeare explores several themes and issues within Romeo and Juliet. They would provide useful discussion points for interpreting different elements of specific scenes.

PARENTS VERSUS CHILDREN

This theme represents the struggle of young people to make their own choices, in the face of parents' vested interests. Examples of this theme can be seen in:

- The Prologue: The Chorus describes the parents' 'ancient grudge', which is the catalyst for the death of their children.
- Act 1, Scene 1: Lord Capulet approves Paris's request to ask Juliet to marry him.
- Act 3, Scene 5: Lord and Lady Capulet tell Juliet of their arrangements for her to marry Paris.
- Act 5, Scene 3: Romeo and Juliet commit suicide; the parents are faced with the consequences of their ancient feud.

LOVE VERSUS HATE

Love takes on many forms; its power to challenge hate, the impulses of young love, the irrationality of hate and its capacity to destroy love. Examples of this theme can be seen in:

- Act 1, Scene 1: The Capulets and Montagues fight in Verona's marketplace; Romeo tells Benvolio of his unrequited love for Rosaline.
- Act 1, Scene 5: Forgetting Rosaline, Romeo falls in love with Juliet at first sight.
- Act 2, Scene 2: In Juliet's orchard, the two lovers agree to marry.
- Act 3, Scene 1: Tybalt fatally wounds Mercutio under the newly-wed Romeo's arm.
- Act 3, Scene 5: Romeo and Juliet prepare to part after their wedding night.
- Act 5, Scene 3: Romeo and Juliet commit suicide; the Prince asks the two families to reconcile.



FATE

From the moment in the prologue when the Chorus summarizes the play and says that the 'star-crossed lovers' will die, Romeo and Juliet are trapped by fate. No matter what the lovers do, what plans they make, or how much they love each other, their struggles against fate only help fulfill it. But defeating or escaping fate is not the point. No one escapes fate. It is Romeo and Juliet's determination to struggle against fate, in order to be together, whether in life or death that shows the fiery passion of their love, and which makes that love eternal. Examples of this theme can be seen in:

- The Prologue: initiates the idea of fate of the 'Star crossed lovers'.
- Act 3, Scene 1: The fight with Tybalt, resulting in his and Mercutio's death.
- Act 5, Scene 1: Balthasar tells Romeo of Juliet's death and Friar Lawrence learns that Brother John has been unable to travel to Mantua to tell Romeo that Juliet still lives.

STAGING THE PLAY

In Shakespeare's time, the Elizabethan theatres were built of wood and composed of three tiers of seating in a circular shape, around a stage area that was on one side of the circle. A roof section would partially cover the audience, leaving the standing area and performance space exposed to the elements. Appropriately, 1,750 audience members could pay extra money to sit in the covered seating area, while the 800 'groundlings' paid less to stand in the open, in front of the stage.

The stage area was divided into three levels: a main stage area with doors at the rear and a curtained area in the back for 'discovery scenes'; an upper, canopied area called 'heaven', for balcony scenes; and an area under the stage called 'hell', which could be accessed by a trap door in the stage. The performances would take place during the day, to allow the use of natural light in the absence of theatrical lighting. Scenery and props were scarce and the audiences were to rely on the actors' lines and staging to supply the time of day, location and atmosphere of the scenes. It is thought that this is why the language is so descriptive. The popularity of the play has lent itself well to being performed in a vast range of experimental



ways. Encourage students to consider a wide variety of styles and choices for staging that would assist the flow and ebb of the key themes, symbols and motifs. Explore too, the original staging, to help understand the structure and language.

There is a wealth of material on notable past productions online, such as the Zeffirelli 1960 Old Vic production, in which he integrated his own Italian background, to full effect, creating a compellingly real atmosphere of Italian street life. London audiences were wowed and bemused by the sight of young people flirting, chatting and fighting in a totally naturalistic style; the title roles were played most notably by Judi Dench and John Stride.



A sharp contrast to the above was the 1947 Brook production, which went against the natural inclination of the time. Brook's interpretation stressed and emphasised the play's violence and the lovers' extreme naivety of youth, in a compelling and controversial approach. Notably, Paul Scofield's bitter and dark Mercutio and the absence of the families' declaration of peace at the end of the play, served as the apex to this prominent production.

Considering these productions, or any that you may have access to, may help to inspire students to interpret the play.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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William Shakespeare, G. Blakemore Evans (ed.), *Romeo and Juliet: The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, 2003, Cambridge University Press

William Shakespeare, Rex Gibson (ed.), *Romeo and Juliet - 3rd edition*, 2005, Cambridge University Press

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