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A Guide to ROMEO & JULIET

by William Shakespeare

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare probably wrote *Romeo and Juliet* in the period 1594–5. He had just turned thirty, and was already developing a formidable reputation as a playwright and poet. He had left his native Stratford-on-Avon for London some five years before, and was by now a member of the most prestigious and successful acting company in the capital, his plays receiving acclaim at both the public playhouses and the court of Queen Elizabeth.

Although the play was based on a well-known story, the first performances of *Romeo and Juliet* seem to have caused something of a sensation. This was the first time that a full-scale tragedy had dealt with love. Traditionally, tragedies had taken the downfall of kings and emperors as their theme; love, particularly between young people, was regarded as the subject-matter of comedy. The play's setting, too, was recognisably modern, as opposed to the classical world in which tragedies were normally set.

Play texts were guarded jealously by acting companies. If they were published at all, it was generally many years after their composition, when the company could no longer profit from performances. In an attempt to cash in on the popularity of *Romeo and Juliet*, however, unauthorised copies of the play were printed within a year or two of the first performances: the text for these was probably put together by actors, hired by Shakespeare's company, who had played minor roles in the original production. Full of mistakes, omissions and misunderstandings, this 'pirated' version was soon supplanted when Shakespeare's company authorised publication of the original text, giving us the play that we know today.

In the four centuries since its creation, *Romeo and Juliet* has become one of the world's best-loved plays. It has been performed countless times; it has been translated, adapted, filmed and televised; and it has been the inspiration for a wealth of symphonic music, ballet and opera.

"... Romeo and Juliet *is as perfectly achieved as anything in Shakespeare's work. It is a flawless little jewel of a play. It has the clear, bright colours, the blend of freshness and formality, of an illuminated manuscript."*

John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare*

A family feud afflicts Verona

The Italian city of Verona, ancient, beautiful and prosperous, is blighted by violence.

An age-old feud between two of its noble families, the Montagues and the Capulets, has been smouldering since time immemorial: and the unending hostility erupts, time and again, into aggression, confrontation and brawling. Family members, relatives, servants, friends and allies are all drawn into the conflict, and at times the quarrelling between the households has spilt over into sporadic street fighting and outright civil disorder.

It is now July. In the long, hot days of midsummer, a menacing air hangs over the city streets: the feud is never far away.

Curtain up

A premonition of tragedy

The Chorus recounts the tragedy which is to come.

The feud between the warring families of Montague and Capulet will only end, he foretells, with the death of their children, destined to take their own lives:

Chorus: From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life,
Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.

Sampson is spoiling for a fight I, i

Two servants of the Capulet household, Sampson and Gregory, are on the streets of Verona, armed and ready for trouble. In their banter there is an undercurrent of violence and malice, and Sampson boasts of his eagerness to fight.

Gregory points out that the bad blood is between the Montague and Capulet families, not their servants. Sampson shrugs off the distinction; as far as he is concerned, anyone connected with the Montague household is his sworn enemy. Egged on by Gregory, he fantasises of his treatment of the Montagues, his language heavy with innuendo. In Sampson's imagination, his lust for fighting and for rape are almost indistinguishable:

Sampson: I will show myself a tyrant: when I have fought with the men I will be civil with the maids, I will cut off their heads.
Gregory: The heads of the maids?
Sampson: Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads; take it in what sense thou wilt.
Gregory: They must take it in sense[1] that feel it.
Sampson: Me they shall feel while I am able to stand …

[1] *in reality, perceptibly*

Abram and Balthasar, two servants of the Montague household, now appear. Sampson is raring for a fight, but is keen that the blame for starting it should fall on the Montagues. He draws his sword, and tries to tempt his opponents to anger by making an insulting gesture, but without success:

Sampson: … I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it.
Abram: Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
Sampson: I do bite my thumb, sir.
Abram: Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
Sampson: [*To Gregory*] Is the law of our side if I say ay?
Gregory: No.
Sampson: No sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir.

Montague's men, though hostile, do not respond. Sampson tries again. His master Capulet is as good a man as Montague, he tells Abram aggressively. Again the others refuse to rise to the bait, and the uneasy standoff continues. Emboldened by the approach of Tybalt, a member of the Capulet family, Gregory urges his friend to claim that Lord Capulet is the better man. Sampson does so: Abram accuses him of lying: and the tension erupts into violence, all four men drawing their swords and laying into their opponents.

> *"If* Romeo and Juliet *is the most romantic of Shakespeare's plays, it is also, from the opening episode with its ribald jesting between Capulet's servants, the bawdiest."*
>
> Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare: A Dramatic Life*, 1994

Rioting breaks out

Benvolio, Lord Montague's nephew, arrives on the scene and immediately calls on the servants to stop fighting. He draws his sword and tries to force the two sides apart: and it is at this moment that Tybalt, nephew of Lady Capulet, arrives. Unlike Benvolio, the hot-tempered Tybalt has no inclination towards peacemaking. His hatred for the Montagues is intense, and he is glad of this opportunity to attack his enemy. He draws his sword and lunges at Benvolio, who is forced to defend himself.

The commotion has by now attracted the attention of the populace. The citizens of Verona gather round, some joining the fray on one side or the other, armed with whatever clubs, axes and spears they can lay their hands on.

Old Lord Capulet himself soon appears, along with his wife. He calls for his sword: Lady Capulet remarks that, at his age, a pair of crutches would be of more use to him. Next on the scene is Lord Montague. As a quarrel flares up between the two old men, Lady Montague sternly orders her husband to keep out of trouble.

Finally, the ruler of Verona, Prince Escalus, approaches with his guards and attendants. The scene of disorder, hostility and violence on the streets of his city fills him with anger and dismay. His first attempt to address the crowd is drowned in the noise and turmoil of the brawl. Raising his voice, he orders them all to drop their weapons, threatening to punish with torture any who do not obey. Order is eventually restored, and the Prince commands the attention of his subjects.

This is not the first time that fighting has broken out in the streets of the city, declares Escalus, and he is well aware of the cause:

Prince: Three civil brawls bred of an airy word
By thee, old Capulet, and Montague,
Have thrice disturb'd the quiet of our streets
And made Verona's ancient citizens
Cast by their grave-beseeming ornaments[1]
To wield old partisans,[2] in hands as old,
Canker'd[3] with peace, to part your canker'd hate.

[1] *renounce their suitably dignified behaviour*
[2] *spears, pikes*
[3] *rusty*

The violence must end, announces the Prince: if another public brawl of this kind occurs, he warns, the participants will face the death penalty.

As Prince Escalus leaves, he tells Lord Capulet to accompany him; Lord Montague must appear before him later in the day. He orders the crowd of citizens to disperse peacefully.

"Shakespeare has given his magistrate a conscience and a growing presentiment of what must happen to everyone in Verona if the wound in the civil body cannot be healed. Others want to keep the peace, too, but mainly because they have a perfunctory sense of duty, or perhaps because they dislike fighting. Escalus knows from the beginning that keeping the peace here is a matter of life or death."

J. A. Bryant Jr, Introduction to the Signet Classic edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, 1964

Romeo's parents are anxious

Lord and Lady Montague remain behind with Montague's nephew Benvolio. Montague, worried by the sudden flaring up of the old feud, asks how the disturbance started. Benvolio explains that he had intervened to break up a fight between servants of the two households, that Tybalt had attacked him furiously but ineffectually, and that the fighting had boiled over into the riot they have just witnessed.

Lady Montague is relieved that her son Romeo was not present at the brawl. She asks Benvolio, who is a close friend of Romeo's, whether he has seen her son. Benvolio reveals that early in the morning, in a melancholy mood, he was walking through the woods when he caught sight of Romeo: however, the young man, clearly wanting to be alone, disappeared into the woods as soon as he noticed Benvolio.

Lord Montague reflects that Romeo's behaviour has been strange and worrying of late. His son has been seen many times wandering through the gloom before dawn, alone and tearful. Coming home at sunrise, he often shuts himself away in his darkened room:

Lord Montague: … Away from light steals home my heavy[1] son
And private in his chamber pens himself,
Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out
And makes himself an artificial night.

[1] *sad, listless*

Romeo's parents, and others, have tried to discover the cause of the young man's despair, but so far he has kept his feelings closely guarded:

Lord Montague: … he, his own affections' counsellor,[1]
Is to himself …
… so secret and so close,
So far from sounding and discovery,[2]
As is the bud bit with an envious[3] worm
Ere he can spread his sweet leaves to the air
Or dedicate his beauty to the sun.

[1] *revealing his emotions only to himself*
[2] *allowing the depth and nature of his feelings to be known*
[3] *malicious*

Romeo himself now appears. Benvolio asks Lord and Lady Montague to leave the two of them alone together: he will do everything he can to get to the root of the problem. Grateful for his help, and hoping that he will have more success than the others who have tried to talk to Romeo, they hurry away.

Benvolio discovers the truth

Benvolio bids his friend good morning. Romeo is surprised to hear that it is still morning, and complains that time is dragging by too slowly. The cause of Romeo's despair, which has eluded his parents so completely, now becomes plain:

Benvolio: … What sadness lengthens Romeo's hours?
Romeo: Not having that which, having, makes them short.
Benvolio: In love?
Romeo: Out.
Benvolio: Of love?
Romeo: Out of her favour where I am in love.
Benvolio: Alas that love so gentle in his view[1]
Should be so tyrannous and rough in proof.[2]

[1] *in appearance*
[2] *when experienced*

In short, Romeo is hopelessly in love; and the girl he loves is interested neither in love nor in Romeo. As a result, he has become moody and distracted, and, whilst remaining withdrawn in public, has taken to elaborate, poetic expression of his feelings. He rejects Benvolio's sympathy, claiming that it will only add to his burden:

Romeo: … This love that thou hast shown
Doth add more grief to too much of mine own.
Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs;
Being purg'd, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes;
Being vex'd, a sea nourish'd with lovers' tears;
What is it else? A madness most discreet,
A choking gall, and a preserving sweet.

Romeo asks Benvolio to leave him, but his friend, hoping to help Romeo break free from his obsession, insists on staying by his side.

Benvolio asks the name of Romeo's beloved: but Romeo refuses to utter it, fearing that the pain would be too much to bear. He will only reveal that, to his despair, she has committed herself to a chaste, unmarried life:

Romeo: … O she is rich in beauty, only poor
That when she dies, with beauty dies her store.[1]
Benvolio: Then she hath sworn that she will still[2] live chaste?
Romeo: She hath, and in that sparing[3] makes huge waste.
For beauty starv'd with her severity
Cuts beauty off from all posterity.

[1] *the beauty that could be passed on to future generations dies with her*
[2] *always*
[3] *thrift, saving (of her capacity to bear children)*

Benvolio advises his friend to set aside his infatuation and allow himself at least to look at other women. That would only make matters worse, replies Romeo: the sight of other, less beautiful women can only serve to remind him of the perfection of his beloved.

"Like all the plays of this period, it reflects something of that disturbance in Shakespeare's own emotional life, of which the more direct, but far from clear, record is the Sonnets. Shakespeare has been, at the age of thirty or thereabouts, in love, and it has proved a rather serious matter. He has come through the fire and is more or less whole again, no doubt; but he still remains much preoccupied with his puzzling and not altogether satisfactory adventure."

E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey*, 1904

A disappointment for Paris I, ii

Old Lord Capulet is talking to Count Paris, a young nobleman of the family of Prince Escalus. Capulet remarks that he and Montague have both been ordered by the Prince to keep the peace: at their age, he reflects, they should be able to put their enmity behind them.

Paris is pleased that the feud between the two respected houses is over. However, he is anxious to discuss a more pressing, personal matter. He has already asked for the hand of Juliet, Lord Capulet's young daughter, in marriage: now he is keen to hear Capulet's decision. The old man's words come as a disappointment:

Paris: But now my lord, what say you to my suit?[1]
Lord Capulet: But saying o'er what I have said before.
My child is yet a stranger in the world,
She hath not seen the change of fourteen years.
Let two more summers wither in their pride
Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride.

[1] *request*

Juliet, not yet fourteen, is not ready for marriage and motherhood. One reason for Capulet's concern for his daughter is immediately made clear:

Paris: Younger than she are happy mothers made.
Lord Capulet: And too soon marr'd[1] are those so early made.
Earth hath swallow'd all my hopes but she …

[1] *spoilt, aged*

Juliet is Capulet's only surviving child, and he does not want his heiress to face the perils of childbirth at such a young age. Marriage must wait: in the meantime, however, Capulet is happy for Paris to try to win Juliet's affection. In the fullness of time, he hopes, Juliet may choose to marry the Count of her own free will, in which case Capulet will gladly give his consent.

Lord Capulet mentions that there will be a feast at his house this evening, and asks Paris to come. Among the guests will be many beautiful young women:

Lord Capulet: At my poor house look to behold this night
Earth-treading stars that make dark heaven light.
Such comfort as do lusty young men feel
When well-apparell'd April on the heel
Of limping winter treads, even such delight
Among fresh female buds shall you this night
Inherit[1] at my house.

[1] *receive, enjoy*

Juliet, of course, will be amongst those present: but Capulet is keen that Paris should feel free to enjoy the company of all the young women, and should keep an open mind about his choice of future bride.

As the two of them leave, Capulet calls for a servant and hands him the list of guests. He instructs the man to visit all those named in the list, and to invite each one to his house for the evening's festivities.

An unexpected invitation

Before the servant has a chance to speak, Capulet and Paris are gone. The man looks at the list in bewilderment; he cannot read, and will need help before he can set off on his errand.

At this moment Romeo passes by, accompanied by Benvolio, who is still trying to persuade his friend to cure himself of his obsession by turning his attention to other women. The servant approaches and asks for help. Taking Romeo's melodramatic answer literally, he is still unsure whether he has found assistance or not:

Servant: God gi' good e'en; I pray, sir, can you read?
Romeo: Ay, mine own fortune in my misery.
Servant: Perhaps you have learned it without book.[1] But I pray can you read anything you see?

[1] *without reading; by listening and memorising*

Finally the servant establishes that Romeo is genuinely able to read, and he hands him the guest list. Romeo reads out the names, and is curious to know where the gathering is to be held. The servant tells him and, grateful for his help, takes the liberty of inviting the stranger to join them:

Servant: My master is the great rich Capulet, and if you be not of the house of Montagues I pray come and crush a cup of wine.

The servant hurries off to summon the guests. Benvolio is delighted by the chance encounter that has just occurred; for among the guests is Capulet's niece Rosaline. As Benvolio has by now discovered, this is the very girl with whom Romeo is so besotted.

Benvolio proposes that they should go to the feast to compare Romeo's beloved with the other young women; the comparison may even make him change his mind about Rosaline's perfection. Romeo fervently declares that such faithlessness is unthinkable:

Benvolio: At this same ancient[1] feast of Capulet's
Sups the fair Rosaline, whom thou so loves,
With all the admired beauties of Verona.
Go thither and with unattainted[2] eye
Compare her face with some that I shall show
And I will make thee think thy swan a crow.
Romeo: When the devout religion of mine eye
Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to fire …

[1] *traditional, time-honoured*
[2] *impartial*

Romeo agrees to go to the feast with Benvolio: but his only pleasure, he insists, will be to relish the sight of his adored Rosaline.

The Nurse reminisces I, iii

Lady Capulet wishes to have a word with her daughter Juliet. She asks the Nurse – who has been nanny, wet nurse, carer and companion since Juliet's infancy – to call for her.

When Juliet arrives, Lady Capulet asks the Nurse to leave them; the subject she wishes to broach with her daughter is confidential. However, no sooner has she sent the Nurse off than she calls her back again, deciding that the Nurse too should hear what she has to say. She starts by raising the matter of Juliet's age.

The Nurse latches on to the subject eagerly, keen to recollect every last detail. First she recalls the birth of her own daughter Susan, born at the same time as Juliet but now dead:

Nurse: … Come Lammas Eve[1] at night shall she be fourteen.
Susan and she – God rest all Christian souls –
Were of an age. Well, Susan is with God;
She was too good for me.

[1] *31st July, the day before Lammas (a harvest festival, at which loaves made from the first ripe corn are consecrated)*

As she thinks back, another event comes to the Nurse's mind, one that happened on the very day that she had decided to wean the infant Juliet off breast-milk:

Nurse: 'Tis since the earthquake now eleven years,
And she was wean'd – I never shall forget it –
Of all the days of the year upon that day.
For I had then laid wormwood to my dug,[1]
Sitting in the sun under the dovehouse wall …
Shake! quoth the dovehouse.[2] 'Twas no need, I trow,
To bid me trudge.[3]
And since that time it is eleven years.

[1] *put bitter oil on my nipple (to put the child off breast-feeding)*
[2] *the dovehouse shook*
[3] *there was no need to urge me to run off*

'Tis since the earthquake now eleven years …

The Nurse's recollection might well have rung true for the play's original audience. There had been a number of major earthquakes in England within living memory, including one in 1584, some eleven years before the first performances of *Romeo and Juliet*. Scholarly attempts to find evidence of an earthquake in Verona are almost certainly misguided; Shakespeare's Verona, like his Venice, his Athens and his Bohemia, is firmly rooted in Elizabethan England.

The loquacious Nurse, now well into her stride, remembers another little episode from the same time, when a bawdy remark from her husband had an unexpected response from the innocent child:

Nurse: … even the day before, she broke her brow,[1]
And then my husband – God be with his soul,
A[2] was a merry man – took up the child,
'Yea', quoth he, 'dost thou fall upon thy face?
Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit,
Wilt thou not, Jule?' And by my holidame,
The pretty wretch left crying and said 'Ay'.
… I warrant, and[3] I should live a thousand years
I never should forget it.

[1] *fell and banged her forehead*
[2] *he*
[3] *if*

The Nurse is so pleased with the anecdote that, despite Lady Capulet's protestations, she repeats the punch line twice, helpless with laughter.

Lady Capulet has ambitions for her daughter

The Nurse's chattering finally comes to an end, and Lady Capulet now raises the subject that is on her mind. She knows of Count Paris's interest in Juliet, and unlike her husband has no qualms about pressing ahead with such an excellent match as soon as possible. Her question takes the young girl by surprise, although the Nurse is proud of the aptness of her response:

Lady Capulet: Tell me, daughter Juliet,
How stands your dispositions to be married?
Juliet: It is an honour that I dream not of.
Nurse: An honour. Were not I thine only nurse
I would say thou hadst suck'd wisdom from thy teat.

Lady Capulet: Well, think of marriage now. Younger than you
Here in Verona, ladies of esteem,
Are made already mothers.
… Thus then in brief:
The valiant Paris seeks you for his love.

The Nurse, excitable about marriage in general, is almost speechless with enthusiasm for the noble young kinsman of the Prince. Lady Capulet's praise is more measured as she asks Juliet, gently but insistently, whether her feelings are favourable:

Nurse: A man, young lady. Lady, such a man
As all the world – why, he's a man of wax.[1]
Lady Capulet: Verona's summer hath not such a flower.
Nurse: Nay, he's a flower, in faith a very flower.
Lady Capulet: What say you, can you love the gentleman?

[1] *faultless, perfect*

Lady Capulet asks Juliet to observe the Count closely at this evening's feast, and to note his agreeable good looks. All that is lacking to make him whole and perfect is a wife:

Lady Capulet: … Read o'er the volume of young Paris' face
And find delight writ there with beauty's pen.
Examine every married lineament[1]
And see how one another[2] lends content;
And what obscur'd in this fair volume lies,
Find written in the margent[3] of his eyes.
This precious book of love, this unbound lover,
To beautify him only lacks a cover.

[1] *harmoniously matched feature*
[2] *one feature to another*
[3] *margin*

Lady Capulet asks again whether Juliet is ready to accept Paris's love. Juliet, obedient but cautious, promises to look favourably at the young man during the evening's festivities.