

# Romeo and Juliet

## Introduction

---

This web page is intended for students who are following GCSE specifications (a UK exam) in English Language and English literature. It may also be of general interest to students of Shakespeare's plays.

If you have the text of the play as an electronic document (an e-text), you can use your text editor (such as WordPad) or word processor (such as Word, WordPro or WordPerfect) to search for items of interest, and help you in other ways. To get a copy of the play as a text file, go to the e-text library of *Project Gutenberg*.

## How to write about Shakespeare's plays

---

Let the teacher/examiner assessing your written (or spoken) work see that you know that a play is **drama**. It happens in performance in a theatre (or, today, in a feature film or TV or radio broadcast). It is not a book and there are no readers. You may have used a book containing the characters' lines, some basic stage directions and lots of notes to help you study the play. But this is not what Shakespeare intended for his audience.

Show that you understand the difference between (fictional) characters in the play, and the (real) actors who play the parts. On the other hand, be careful when you write about things you have seen in performances of the play. If the director has changed something, be aware of this. For example, you may have seen feature films, such as those directed by Franco Zeffirelli (1968) or Baz Luhrmann (1996). In these many things are changed:

- Franco Zeffirelli changes the way Friar Lawrence tries to send his message to Romeo in Mantua, and he alters the order of some scenes.
- In Baz Luhrmann's film, swords become handguns manufactured by gunsmiths called 'Sword', Romeo takes a mind-expanding drug before Capulet's ball and Mercutio is killed on a beach, with a sliver of glass.
- Both directors cut out Romeo's fight with Paris in Act 5 - so at the end of the play when the Prince says he has lost 'a brace of kinsmen' (two male relatives) the audience can only think of one, Mercutio, whom they have seen killed. (This is only a selection - you will notice many more changes from the text you have studied.)

It may be all right to mention these things so long as you show you know that they are the director's ideas, and not Shakespeare's. But avoid such errors as writing that Juliet shoots herself at the end of the play! And don't call the play a 'film' or a 'book'.

Finally, do not copy long passages from the text of the play. Do quote short phrases or single words, putting these in speech marks. Do not write the verb 'quote' to introduce a quotation. Always explain, or comment on, what you quote, using your own words.

The notes that follow should give you some ideas about what happens in selected episodes from the play, about how they show the themes of the play and its characters. There are also notes on how the play is written. These refer to the structure of the scene, to dramatic language, and to Shakespeare's stagecraft as it affects the plays in performance.

## Studying Shakespeare for assessed work at GCSE

---

If you study a play by Shakespeare for GCSE, your work should have certain kinds of content. For all grades (from G to A\*) you are expected to write (or speak) about three things:

- What the play is about - subject and theme (this appears as such things as 'nature of the play, implications and relevance' [Grade C] or its 'moral, philosophical or social significance' [A\*]).
- Technical aspects of drama - characters or characterisation, stagecraft, appeal to audience.
- Language - especially for dramatic, poetic or figurative effect, and patterns and details of words and images [A\*].

This task requires you to study one or more important scenes from the play. It can accompany work on this play or others, when you submit your work on Shakespeare for assessment. Comments that follow are organised according to the three categories (kinds) of comment above.

## Studying Act 1, Scene 5

---

### What this scene is about – subject and theme

In this scene Romeo and Juliet meet. Note that in spite of its title, this play has very few scenes in which **both** lovers are present. The others are the balcony scene (2.2), the short wedding scene (2.6) and the opening of Act 3, Scene 5. The lovers are both on stage in Act 5, Scene 3 - but Romeo kills himself before Juliet wakes.

Shakespeare prepares for this scene by showing Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline (a very strong 'crush' on her). On the guest list for the party, Rosaline is described as Capulet's 'fair niece,' but she never appears in the play. Benvolio (in 1.2) has promised to show Romeo a more attractive woman, but doesn't really have anyone special in mind, as far as we know. Similarly, we know that Juliet is there because Capulet wants to give Paris a chance to meet her - this is why he throws the party.

Capulet's speech to Paris (in 1.2) suggests that Juliet has not been out of her house much (only, perhaps, to go to worship and confession at Friar Lawrence's cell). Maybe this is why Paris (a family friend) has noticed her, but Romeo has no idea who she is. Immediately before this scene, Romeo has spoken of his fear that some terrible 'consequence [result] yet hanging in the stars' shall begin at 'this night's revels' (Capulet's party). Does this fear come true? Tybalt's behaviour has also been prepared for by the brawl in the play's first scene.

In the scene, several things happen. Servants do their job; Capulet chats to a friend; Tybalt sees Romeo, wants to fight him and is told off by Capulet for his behaviour. Romeo and Juliet meet, and each finds out who the other is. But the most important things in the scene are:

- the way Romeo falls in love with Juliet at first sight
- the way this contrasts with Tybalt's anger and hatred.

Romeo never knows that it is his presence at the party that causes Tybalt later to challenge him to a duel. These things lead to the events of Act 3, Scene 1, where Mercutio and Tybalt die.

## The structure of the scene

In the opening the servants speak informally (in prose, not verse), about all the work they have to do. This prepares for the grand entrance when the Capulets come on stage, in procession, wearing their expensive clothing and speaking verse. Romeo's comments about Juliet alternate with Tybalt's attempt to attack Romeo - who does not know that he's been noticed. At the end of the scene, the Nurse tells each lover who the other one is.

Within this general outline, Shakespeare shows the most important episode is that where Romeo and Juliet speak for the first time. This has the form of a sonnet (a rhyming fourteen line poem) - which many in the 16th Century audience would notice, as they heard the pattern of rhymes.

## Characters

There are many named characters in this scene, but you should concentrate on four of them mainly: Romeo, Juliet, Capulet and Tybalt. The Nurse gives bits of information, and Lady Capulet tells Tybalt off briefly. But the most important pair is Romeo and Juliet - look at their speech for evidence of their feelings. Romeo has told us he is attracted to Juliet. Her reaction shows that she is interested in him - she allows him to take her hand and to kiss her. Anything more in a public situation could make us think Juliet to be promiscuous.

The next most important pair is Tybalt and Capulet. Capulet may dislike the Montagues, but he is trying to obey the Prince's command. But as a host, he cannot allow even an enemy to be attacked under his own roof. And, he tells Tybalt, Romeo is 'virtuous and well-governed' [well-behaved]. Tybalt is angry at losing the chance for a fight, and blames Romeo for this, especially when he is made to look silly by Capulet, who tells him off and calls him a 'saucy boy'.

## Language

When Romeo sees Juliet he speaks about her, using **metaphor**:

**'She doth teach the torches to burn bright.'**

This tells us that Juliet's beauty is much brighter than that of the torches - so she is very beautiful. She is so much brighter that she teaches the torches how to shine - a poetic exaggeration, since torches can't really be taught. It is important for Romeo to say this, as the audience cannot see Juliet's beauty directly - in Shakespeare's theatre a boy, perhaps seen at some distance, plays Juliet. But the metaphor also tells us that it is night, as Romeo can see the torches he compares her to. The audience must imagine this, as the play is performed by daylight, and no lighted torch would be safe in the theatre (the real **Globe** theatre was eventually destroyed by fire). At a private performance, at night in a rich person's house, there might be real torches on the walls, of course.

## AM

There are other interesting comparisons. In 1.2 Benvolio has said that he will show Romeo women who will make his 'swan' (Rosaline) look like a 'crow' (supposedly a common and ugly bird). Now Romeo, in a very similar comparison, says that Juliet (whose name he does not yet know) is like a 'snowy dove' among 'crows' (the other women). She stands out in a dark room as a bright jewel (which would catch the torchlight) in the ear of a dark-skinned person. The contrast of light and darkness in these comparisons suggests that Juliet is fair-skinned and perhaps fair-haired while most of the other women are dark. Although other people are on stage as Romeo says these things, he really speaks his thoughts or thinks aloud - so these speeches are **soliloquies** (solo speaking).

When Romeo speaks to Juliet he compares her hand to a holy place ('shrine') which he may defile ('profane') with his hand. He compares his lips to pilgrims that can 'smooth' away the 'rough touch' of the hand with a kiss.

'Gentle sin' is what we call an **oxymoron** - a contradiction. Why? Because 'gentle' means noble or virtuous (in the 16th Century) while a 'sin' is usually the opposite of noble. Juliet explains that handholding is the right kind of kiss for pilgrims, while lips are for praying. Romeo's witty response is to ask for permission to let his lips do what his hands are allowed to, and Juliet agrees to 'grant' this for the sake of his prayers. When Romeo kisses her, Juliet says she has received the sin he has 'purged' from himself. Romeo insists at once that he must take it back - and kisses her again!

Note how, throughout this scene (apart from the servants who use informal thou/thee/ty pronoun forms) the characters (even Romeo and Juliet) often address each other with the formal and respectful pronoun 'you'. When Capulet is being pleasant to Tybalt he uses thou/thee/ty but when he becomes angry he switches to 'you'. The same thing happens when he becomes angry with Juliet in Act 3, scene 5.

## Stagecraft

When you write about this scene, think about how it would be staged in the 16th Century and today. At the start, the servants will have props to show that they are clearing up. These might include napkins, and trenchers (a kind of plate). The servants' simple clothes will show their status (social position) - today they might wear the formal clothes of waiters. These will probably be the same servants who quarrel with the Montague servants at the start of the play.

The wealthy noble guests will have expensive formal clothes. The young men are allowed to be 'maskers'. (They wear masks to hide who they are.) This lets them act in a familiar way to a lady, and flirt or attempt courtship. If they are successful, they will still need their parents' approval for a match leading to marriage. There are opportunities for dancing, and the scene should have music played for this. We know that young men do not wear swords at a ball in the house of a nobleman (as they do in the street) since Tybalt orders a page to fetch his rapier. (In the street, in Acts 1 and 3, he is wearing his sword, as are all of the young noblemen. For example, in 1.1, Benvolio draws a sword and urges Tybalt to do the same, to stop the servants fighting.)

When Romeo and Juliet meet, their speech shows the sequence of actions from handholding to kissing. We do not know exactly how this would be acted out in Shakespeare's theatre with boy actors in the female rôles - but perhaps there would be a very obvious and slow embrace, while the kiss would be easy to simulate. In modern film versions, with actresses shown in close-up, we expect rather more authentic action in this episode!

## Studying Act 3, scene 1

### What this scene is about - subject and theme

This scene occurs immediately after Romeo has married Juliet - which explains his friendliness to Tybalt. The general contrast of love and hate in the play is explicit (very clear) in this scene.

Another theme of the play that is strong in this scene is the idea that we are not in control of our lives (the Friar will say to Juliet later: 'A greater power than we can contradict/Hath thwarted our intents'). Here when Romeo has killed Tybalt he cries out: 'I am fortune's fool'. What does this mean?

Yet another theme that appears is that of the feud and how innocent lives are harmed by it. Here it is Mercutio who curses the feuding families: 'A plague on both your houses!' What does this mean? Later Paris, too, will die because of the feud, as well as the young lovers who belong to the feuding families but have wanted not to be part of the quarrel.

### Stagecraft

In this section you should refer to different performances of the play that you have seen. You must comment on the **action**, **use of properties** and the **structure of the scene**.

To take the last first, the scene is really in a number of episodes:

- first, Mercutio and Benvolio wait for the Capulets to arrive, and Mercutio trades insults with Tybalt when they do;
- then Romeo is challenged by Tybalt and refuses;
- Mercutio fights Tybalt and is fatally wounded when Romeo intervenes;
- Romeo pursues Tybalt and kills him;
- finally Benvolio gives an account of events to the Prince, who banishes Romeo.

Comment on any of these episodes, or how they contribute to the total effect of the scene.

### Use of props

In this scene, the most obvious stage props are the swords used in the fighting (in Baz Luhrmann's 1997 feature film there are guns ['Sword' is the manufacturer] and other weapons). Explain how swords would be used in Shakespeare's theatre, and how they are used in performances of the play that you have seen. Are any other props used in this scene?

### Action

There are two passages of fighting. The stage directions merely tell us who fights and who dies. Shakespeare's own company would have known without any written directions how to perform the fights - such scenes were like stunts in films today: the actors would impress the audience by their virtuosity (evident skill) with the swords.

How long would this take on stage? How long does it take in productions you have seen? Are both fights similar? (They are very different from each other in Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film version.) Critical to the outcome of the first fight is Romeo's intervention - explain how this proves fatal for his friend, and how it is shown in performances you have seen. Is there any other action of interest?

## Costume

How is costume important in this play, especially in versions you have seen? Look at how costume distinguishes Capulet from Montague (shows who is who). How does Zeffirelli use costume effectively to show the change in mood in this scene?

## Language

There is too much interesting language in the scene to cover in this short guide, which will give a selection of interesting features of language, but expect to look at other things with your teacher.

### Verse and prose

Often in this play Mercutio speaks in prose. This is a mark of informality, but not of low social class - Hamlet, Theseus and Prince Hal (in three other plays) as well as Mercutio are all from royal families yet all sometimes speak in prose. Speaking in prose shows their attitude to the situation they are in or the person they are addressing.

In this scene various characters speak in prose, but after Mercutio's death the more serious mood is shown as characters all speak in blank (unrhymed) verse. This is kept up until the end of the scene, where Benvolio, Lady Capulet, Montague and the Prince all speak in rhyming verse (Benvolio drops the rhyme in the middle of his long narrative). Comment on the effect this has on the audience.

### Language use for dramatic effect

Look at how the enemies try to win the verbal battle. Explain how Mercutio tries to upset Tybalt in various ways. First, he plays on his name ('ratcatcher...King of cats...nine lives'). He ridicules (he has also done this in an earlier scene) Tybalt's supposed skill in fencing ('Alla stoccata...Come, sir, your passado').

Look at attitudes to social class. Why does Tybalt call Romeo a 'villain' and why does Romeo deny this? He also refers to Romeo as 'my man', and Mercutio challenges this. Why? Comment on the word 'gentlemen' which appears several times, and 'sir'. Explain why Tybalt calls Romeo 'boy' more than once in this scene. Look at the form of the second person pronoun. See whether people call each other 'you' (formal) or 'thou/thee' (also 'thy' = your) which is informal (less respectful). Tybalt usually calls Mercutio 'you' but changes to 'thou' when he accuses him of 'consorting' with Romeo. Why?

If you are puzzled by this, be aware that language use has changed since Shakespeare's time. A **villain** in earlier times was a common person - so the name, applied to a nobleman like Romeo, would be an insult. In calling him **my man** Tybalt speaks of him as if he were a servant - which is why Mercutio says he won't 'wear' Tybalt's 'livery' (the uniform of his servant). The 16th century audience would understand this as they heard it - today it needs spelling out.

What is the effect of Mercutio's response to Tybalt's request for a 'word' - 'Couple it with something; make it a word and a blow'? Note also Mercutio's last words: 'A plague' is a powerful curse in Verona (the plague is in the city) and Shakespeare's audience would find it effective.

## Language use for poetic and figurative effect

This very active scene is not the best place to look for good poetry (we find this in the scene where the lovers meet, or the balcony scene or even in Mercutio's description of 'Queen Mab').

For **figurative** language we need only look at Mercutio's 'fiddlestick' - what is a real fiddlestick and what has he instead? A more powerful poetic image is found in Romeo's challenge to Tybalt:

**'...for Mercutio's soul  
is but a little way above our heads,  
Staying for thine to keep him company  
Either thou, or I, or both must go with him.'**

Explain this image and its effect on the audience.

Perhaps the most powerful (and famous) poetic image is in Romeo's last words in the scene, where he says he is 'fortune's fool'. What does he mean by this? What is its effect on the audience?

Benvolio gives a convincing account of the fighting, contrasting Tybalt's and Mercutio's aggression with Romeo's attempts at peace. We see why Lady Capulet disbelieves him, but he tells the truth. Comment on the audience's response here, bearing in mind that we know:

- that Benvolio is truthful
- why Lady Capulet disputes his account
- why what she says might seem plausible (believable)
- that the Prince knows Tybalt's character, as reported by Benvolio.

## Patterns and details of words and images

This scene (like this whole play) has lots of patterns and wordplay. Much of it is from Mercutio. See for example his claim that Benvolio (a very peaceful person) would quarrel with a man for 'cracking nuts' as he (Benvolio) has 'hazel eyes'.

A more developed series of jokes is in his response to Tybalt's claim that he 'consortest' with Romeo. This is the cue for a series of puns about music ('minstrels' and 'dance' leading to 'fiddlestick').

Another series of jokes comes when Mercutio is wounded: first he is sarcastic (his wound is not as 'deep as a well' or 'wide as a church door' but quite enough to kill him) then he makes a bad pun ('grave man'). Finally, he lists animals to insult his killer: 'A dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death'.

A more elaborate pattern is found in Tybalt's challenge to Romeo and Romeo's replies. Earlier in the play we have heard Romeo take up others' words (Benvolio's or Mercutio's) and answer them with a slightly changed version. When Tybalt sarcastically says 'the love I bear thee' (no love at all) Romeo responds with 'the reason that I have to love thee', while 'Thou art a villain' becomes 'villain am I none'. 'Boy, this shall not excuse the injuries...' is met with 'I do protest I never injur'd thee'. Finally the direct challenge: 'Therefore turn and draw' is countered with 'And so...be satisfied'.

In explaining the effect of this scene on the audience, you are encouraged to refer to any versions of the play in performance that you have seen. How particular directors or actors interpret it may be helpful. Make sure you present this work in an appropriate written or spoken format.

## Studying Act 3, Scene 5

### What this scene is about - subject and theme

This scene opens with Juliet saying goodbye to Romeo, who must leave for Mantua. In the previous scene the audience has heard Capulet offer Juliet's hand in marriage to Paris. We understand why he does this, but we know many things he does not know.

We can foresee that Juliet will not be happy about her father's decision. Once Romeo has gone, Lady Capulet tells Juliet she must marry. Juliet refuses, and her father angrily insists that she marry Paris or be turned out of the house. Alone with the Nurse, Juliet asks for advice. She replies that Juliet should marry Paris. Juliet is astounded and pretends to agree to this advice, while deciding that the only person who can help her is Friar Lawrence. Now she feels most alone in the world.

Modern audiences may wonder what the problem is - why does Juliet not pretend to go through with the marriage? But Shakespeare's audience knows that it is a mortal sin to attempt marriage when you are already married. If you do this, you will certainly be damned (go to Hell). And there is no way that the Friar would conduct such a marriage ceremony, which is one of the sacraments (holy ceremonies or mysteries) of the church. The Nurse must know this, too, but it seems that she does not really believe in, or care about, heaven and hell.

The key to this scene is what various people know:

- Capulet thinks he knows what has upset his daughter (Tybalt's death) but he is quite wrong.
- Lady Capulet knows as little as her husband.
- Juliet knows about her marriage to Romeo, but cannot explain to her parents.
- Juliet doesn't know, until they tell her, about their plans for her to marry Paris.
- The Nurse, at this point, knows about Juliet's secrets.

Only the audience has the full picture. In the scene Juliet repeatedly speaks ambiguously - with one meaning for the person to whom she speaks, and another for herself and the audience. For example:

**The audience knows that Juliet knows that the Nurse knows that Juliet's parents don't know about her marriage to Romeo!**

**Think about it.**

Later we know that the Nurse does not know that Juliet is deceiving her. Throughout the whole scene, Shakespeare makes dramatic use of what people do or don't know.

### The structure of the scene

The structure of the scene is a very simple sequence - the one common element being Juliet, who is present throughout. After the episode where she bids farewell to Romeo (not set for the Key Stage test), Juliet learns from her mother of the intended marriage to Paris. When Juliet defies her mother, Capulet argues with her. He even shouts at the Nurse, when she tries to defend Juliet. Finally, Juliet asks the Nurse for help. When the Nurse lets her down, Juliet is left alone on stage to explain (to the audience) what she is going to do.

## Characters

We find out quite a lot about all of the characters here. Juliet, only moments after being together with Romeo, is in a difficult situation. At first she tries simple defiance, like many a teenager. At the same time she uses irony - saying things that have a different real meaning from what appears on the surface. But she is also resourceful and ultimately very brave. Lady Capulet at first seems concerned for her daughter, but when Juliet defies her, she passes the problem on to her husband.

Capulet cares about Juliet, but he has given his word to Paris, and now he is angry and bullying. But it must seem to him that Juliet is being proud and ungrateful. Modern audiences should remember that arranged marriages are normal for people of Juliet's class, and that Paris, a wealthy relation of the Prince, is a very good prospective husband for her. She is beyond the usual age for marriage, and it is her father who in the past did not wish to marry her off. So now he feels he has spoiled her, and made her 'proud'.

This scene makes the audience completely rethink our opinion of the Nurse. She has always seemed to care for Juliet and understand what matters to her. Now it becomes clear that the Nurse has never really understood her. We are made to think again about coarse remarks the Nurse makes in Act 1, scene 3, and Mercutio's even coarser insults in Act 2, Scene 4. In this scene he calls her a 'bawd' and suggests that she is 'an old hare hoar' ('a hairy old whore'), as well as speaking obscenely about 'the bawdy hand of the dial' being on 'the prick of noon'. Perhaps Mercutio knows, or can see, what she is really like.

At the end of Act 3, scene 5 Juliet, now alone, says that from now on she will not trust the Nurse. She only speaks to her one more time in the play, very briefly in Act 4, Scene 3, and here too Juliet misleads her. It is shocking to think that the Nurse cares more about Juliet marrying, and perhaps having babies, than about her eternal soul or about her real love for Romeo, her husband.

## Language

The most important feature of Juliet's speech in this scene is **ambiguity** or double meanings. When Lady Capulet says that Romeo (by killing Tybalt) has caused Juliet's grief, she agrees that Romeo has made her sad, and that she would like to get her hands on him. By placing one word - 'dead' - between two sentences, Juliet makes her mother think she wants Romeo dead, while really saying that her heart is dead because of him.

When she swears 'by Saint Peter's Church and Peter too', her mother thinks she is just using a strong oath - but the audience knows that Saint Peter decides who goes to heaven or hell: so she is swearing by the saint who would disallow a bigamous marriage. Later, Juliet speaks sarcastically to the Nurse, who thinks she is sincere, when she says that the Nurse has comforted her 'marvellous much', with her suggestion of 'marrying' Paris.

Juliet's last speech in this scene, as she is alone on stage, is, of course, a **soliloquy** - it shows what she is thinking.

Both parents use interesting comparisons for Juliet's tears. Lady Capulet suggests that Juliet is trying to wash Tybalt from his grave, because she is crying so much - she tells her daughter that she is crying too much, and makes a play on the words much and some - 'Some grief shows much of love', but 'much grief shows some want [absence] of wit' [common sense or sense of proportion]. Lady Capulet means that Juliet is overdoing her show of grief. This kind of contrast, where similar words are rearranged in two halves of a sentence to show opposite meanings, is called antithesis.

Capulet also notices Juliet's tears but uses an extended metaphor. He compares the light rain [drizzle] of a real sunset with the heavy downpour of Juliet's tears for the metaphorical sunset [death] of his brother's son [Tybalt]. He develops this into the idea of a ship in a storm at sea - Juliet's eyes are the sea, her body is the bark [ship] and her sighs are the winds.

## AM

Another feature of the language is Capulet's range of insults. He claims that Juliet is **proud**: she insists that she is not, and Capulet repeats the word as evidence of her 'chopt-logic' or splitting hairs. These insults may seem mild or funny today, but were far more forceful in the 16th Century: 'green-sickness carrion', 'tallow-face', 'baggage...wretch' and 'hilding'.

Capulet contrasts Paris's merits as a husband with Juliet's immature objections. He says that Paris is 'Of fair demesnes, youthful and nobly ligned' and 'stuffed...with honourable parts'. He calls his daughter a 'wretched puling fool' and a 'whining mammet', before sarcastically mimicking her objections to the match: 'I cannot love...I am too young'. The audience knows of course that she can and does love (it is Rosaline who cannot), and that she is obviously not 'too young' to marry. See if you can find out what these insults mean. Try to remember them, and act out the scene, making them as forceful as you can.

Also, when Capulet becomes angry, he uses language inventively - so the adjective [describing word] **proud** becomes both verb and noun: 'proud me no prouds'. And finally, he reminds us of his power over Juliet by speaking of her as if she were a thoroughbred horse, which he can sell at will - 'fettle your fine joints', he says, meaning that she must prepare herself for marriage.

### Stagecraft

This scene takes place in Juliet's bedchamber. We may see a bed (or something to represent a bed), but no other furniture is needed. Juliet's costume may show that she has been in bed - though her parents do not suspect that she has had Romeo's company. Otherwise, the scene relies mostly on speech. There are not many clues about action or use of props.

Both her parents speak about Juliet's weeping, and at one point Juliet kneels to beg her father for pity. Capulet's outbursts against Juliet and the Nurse may be opportunities for some physical action as well as verbal aggression to show his anger. What might he do to show how angry he is?

## Characters

---

Here are some brief notes on characters in the play.

### Romeo

Romeo may appear at first glance a changeable, inconsistent character. Perhaps the playwright's own idea of Romeo is not at first clear, or it may be that his youth the strange and disconcerting circumstances in which he finds himself explain the apparent changes in Romeo's attitudes and behaviour.

Though the action of the play occurs over a period of a few days only, Shakespeare gives the impression of the passage of a longer time, and in the course of the drama Romeo appears to be aged by his experiences. So while Tybalt, in Act 3; scene 1, addresses Romeo as 'boy', in the play's final scene Romeo calls Paris 'good gentle youth'.

The Romeo of the early part of the play is definitely boyish but his serious, pensive and fatalistic traits mark him off from his less reflective companions - especially from Mercutio, who, with his blunt speech, his dislike of pretence, his cynical philosophy and his reduction of all love to brutal lust, serves as an excellent foil for Romeo.

Romeo's unrequited love for Rosaline may be evidence of his pessimistic and perverse character. It seems that Rosaline is attractive not for any easily identified perfections, so much as for the fact of her being out of reach (as a Capulet, and sworn to chastity), almost as if Romeo wishes to be rejected, so that he can make a show of his despair. It is a pose that invites criticism or even outright ridicule from Romeo's fellows, and Romeo appears to relish the argument, which is provoked by these comments, and by his defence of his infatuation.

Though Romeo exaggerates his gravity and dejection into a pose, yet these bespeak a real fatalism of outlook, so that he views the future with apprehension, as when his mind 'misgives...some consequence, yet hanging in the stars'. While Romeo's frequent references to fate are often seen as evidence of the playwright's drawing the audience's-attention to the workings of fortune, it may not be so much fate (in the sense of some adverse force, external to the lovers) which is at work, as Romeo's belief in it. There are cruel accidents of circumstance that befall the lovers, but in each case these are compounded by their own deliberate actions. There is certainly a self-destructive impulse at work in their passion for one another.

By frequent reference to Romeo's youth (as in Capulet's words to Tybalt, at the feast) and by Romeo's own account of Rosaline's sworn chastity Shakespeare suggests that Romeo, like Juliet, is a novice in matters of the heart, and so, like her, pure. This is supported by the fact that - (as only an inexperienced lover would) he seeks advice from the celibate priest, Friar Laurence, and confirmed by the nature of his first conversation with Juliet. This is in the form of a sonnet - a strikingly formal device in such a situation - in which the etiquette of courtship is metaphorically represented as an act of religious devotion; the exchange of words here is almost sacramental in quality.

Romeo is ruled by passion rather than reason: thus, when he discovers Juliet's identity, he at once recognises the obstacle which confronts his love, but is not at all deterred from it by considerations of prudence, practicality or danger. 'My life is my foe's debt,' he admits, without further ado.

The exuberance of youth - at its most conspicuous in unrestrained, spontaneous, innocent passion - characterises Romeo's conversations with Juliet after he spies her on her balcony. The lovers say little of direct importance, but the rapturous exchange of passionate sentiment shows us how wrong Mercutio's bawdy jests are in their dismissal of love as a mere animal appetite demanding carnal gratification. (Shakespeare hints that this is an error, by letting us see another error in Mercutio's prior assumption that Romeo is not to be found because he is still pining for Rosaline.) Though Romeo's behaviour immediately after meeting Juliet may appear more boyish (because less melancholy) than his earlier gravity, the real difference is between youthful dejection (producing an exaggerated affectation of adult disillusionment) and youthful rapture.

## AM

With the compliance of the Nurse and Friar Laurence the lovers are swiftly married. In a way it is this that precipitates the unlucky series of events, which leads to Romeo's banishment. Tybalt's slaying of Mercutio and Romeo's realisation of his part in his friend's death call forth a new quality in Romeo, which also springs from his awareness of his adult (because married) status. In his avenging of Mercutio's death, Romeo displays a grim determination and manliness not hitherto seen, a lack of thought or fear for the consequences of his action - he follows the prompting of passion rather than of reason, just as in his clandestine marriage to Juliet he has rejected politic calculation, and obeyed his heart.

From this point Romeo's actions are more and more dictated by passion, and less and less by reason. He panics, and flies to Laurence's cell. Here he discovers that he is to be banished, and becomes almost hysterical at the prospect of separation from Juliet. Drawing a hasty conclusion from the first words of the Nurse (to whom he has not properly attended) he believes he has forfeited Juliet's love in killing Tybalt, and attempts to stab himself, being prevented by the Nurse's intervention and Laurence's plain-speaking. The manliness of Act 3, Scene 1 has for the moment deserted the boy, Romeo.

Like the earlier balcony-scene, the bed-chamber scene serves to show the unrestrained, imprudent character of the youthful lovers: at any moment Lady Capulet may enter (she should, if she had obeyed her husband's instructions, already have done so) and Romeo's life is forfeit if he be found in Verona. Yet first Juliet, then Romeo (as their roles in the argument are switched) pleads the case for his delaying his departure. Juliet's parting words to Romeo ('Methinks I see thee...As one dead in the bottom of a tomb') are not calculated to allay his fears. His fatalistic outlook and impetuous haste bring about the completion of the tragedy, every bit as much as accidents of circumstance, or decisions made by other characters. (These include the decision of Capulet to bring forward Juliet's wedding-day from Thursday to Wednesday; the nature of Laurence's desperate scheme to prevent Juliet's 'marrying' Paris; Friar John's failure to bring Laurence's message to Romeo.)

On hearing Balthasar's news that Juliet has died, Romeo acts with extreme haste, and the servant's disregarded advice ('I do beseech you ... have patience') draws attention to this. Romeo's immediate thought is of suicide. This might (for a heart-broken lover) make sense, if he were sure of his bride's death. But Romeo, surprisingly, seems unconcerned to learn the circumstances and cause of Juliet's death (it might, after all, as Mercutio's has done, require avenging). If Romeo were to learn of the intended marriage to Paris and to note the timing of Juliet's death, he might discern something of Laurence's intention. But Romeo does not question Balthasar further (how much more he knows or believes is thus an academic question), nor does he, on returning to Verona, consult the friar.

He may have some reason for this: he believes Balthasar has told him the truth (and he will verify in the Capulet tomb what he has been told). And the friar, were Romeo to visit him, would perhaps try to dissuade him from suicide. However, it is Romeo's failure to enquire into the cause of Juliet's supposed death, which guarantees the play's fatal outcome - though Shakespeare, at the last, taunts the audience by an unforeseen interruption (Paris's appearance, improbably coinciding with Romeo's arrival, at the tomb). This delays Romeo's otherwise hasty actions in this scene - but by just too little to save him. Though Romeo acts precipitately in his suicidal return to Verona, there is a necessary checking of his haste as he contemplates the scene before him in the tomb. He has time to recognise the fact that he is not the only victim of fortune, and he generously carries out the dying wish of Paris, to be buried in the same tomb as Juliet, laying in the Capulet vault the body of 'lone writ' with him 'in sour misfortune's book'. He delays taking the poison long enough to make sympathetic speeches to the bodies of both Paris and Tybalt. And he delays further as he remarks that Juliet, though dead (as he believes her) still has lively colour in her lips and cheeks. (The audience knows why, but the hasty Romeo fails to discern the cause of this symptom.) Yet it is the haste that has gone before that has shaped the course of events.

Strikingly, though much has been made of the operation of fate in determining Romeo's and Juliet's fortunes, Romeo, at the last, defies its influence, and claims he will: 'shake the yoke of unauspicious stars from this world-wearied flesh'.

Convinced fatalists will argue that Romeo, ironically, is fulfilling the decrees of fate, even as he claims to be free of its influence, because he is fated to die at this point. Romeo himself, speaking to no-one who is able to hear him, believes that in taking the poison, he makes himself free of the 'unauspicious stars', under the yoke of which he has suffered so much. The deeper irony is that the news that can, even now, save him will

come too late not because of the operation of inexorable fortune, but because of his own excessive haste in his reaction to Balthasar's news.

## The Nurse

When we first meet the Nurse, we see her as a coarse and talkative, but well-intentioned woman, without affectation, and having Juliet's best interests at heart. Finally we discover, as Juliet does (passing judgement for us) that the Nurse does not really understand Juliet's love for Romeo and her faithfulness. The Nurse is shown to be essentially lewd and promiscuous.

The first thing that strikes us about the Nurse is her manner of speaking.

- She is extremely garrulous, prone to trivial and irrelevant or inappropriate reminiscences. Thus, when Lady Capulet broaches the subject of Juliet's marriage, her reference to her daughter's age provokes from the Nurse a stream of recollections of Juliet's infancy and childhood. This shows the Nurse to be both long-winded and insensitive to the importance Lady Capulet accords to the subject of her daughter's future.
- In her speeches the Nurse is rarely logical: thus, her evidence for determining Juliet's age is derived by estimating her birth to have occurred three years before a celebrated earthquake (three years being an approximation of the time taken for Juliet's weaning); in her advising Juliet to take Paris as husband in place of Romeo, the Nurse again produces confused reasoning, changing her ground several times.
- The Nurse's conversation is marked by frequent and un-self-conscious use of coarse and earthy expressions: she is not able (or does not realise that she ought) to refrain from such coarseness even when speaking to Lady Capulet - happily referring to her late husband's improper prediction concerning Juliet, and comparing the bump on Juliet's forehead to 'a young cockerel's stone'.

Lady Capulet's changing of her mind, to allow the Nurse to be privy to her suggesting to Juliet that she consider Paris as a suitor tells us several things: Lady Capulet's initial uncertainty doubtless stems from her fear that the Nurse may (as she does) interrupt her own words to Juliet; it also tells us, however, that the Nurse is in the confidence of her mistress who, despite her faults, values her opinion.

The Nurse is evidently a much closer confidante of Juliet, her charge, than of her employers, as she happily assists Juliet in her secret marriage to Romeo. At the time of these events, we assume that the Nurse is motivated by affection for Juliet, and an appreciation of the noble character of her love for Romeo.

Whether Mercutio knows the Nurse rather better than Juliet (which seems improbable) or whether (which seems more likely) his remarks are merely intended to provoke a rather coarse old woman, his calling the Nurse (in Act 2; scene 4): 'A bawd, a bawd, a bawd!' is wholly just. Ironically enough, on this occasion she is trying to appear genteel (hence her instruction to her servant: 'My fan, Peter') and she takes offence at Mercutio's 'ropery'. Yet her protestations against Mercutio's remarks seem to confirm her vulgarity, as she uses very common language, referring to 'flirt gills' and 'skains mates'.

That the Nurse is a bawd becomes apparent (in 3; 5) in her advice to Juliet to marry Paris, on the grounds that Romeo is effectively lost to her. It is clear that the Nurse thinks Juliet should have a man in her bed, and is not troubled by the nicety of marriage - bigamy, for her, is no sin (so long as no-one finds it out, and she won't tell). She has no inkling that Juliet will take offence at this, and fails to perceive the bitter irony of Juliet's 'Amen'. Knowing this, we now understand the relish with which the Nurse has earlier told of her husband's prediction that Juliet would one day fall backward (before a man's embraces). Her assistance of the young lovers in their secret marriage has been principally motivated by the prospect of seeing Juliet bedded.

The audience watches and listens with revulsion as the Nurse later attempts to rouse the drugged Juliet on the morning set for her wedding to Paris, by coarse remarks about the count's designs on her. She last appears in the play greatly distraught by her discovery that Juliet is (apparently) dead, yet not giving a second thought to the far-worse fate to which she would happily have delivered her. Juliet's reproach and judgement of her have been well-merited.

## Comparing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*

---

This task allows you to write about two plays. You could write at great length but this is not necessary, or even sensible. Do not try to retell the plot of either play as a narrative (story). Do look at how the play works on stage: use of props, costume and physical actions - either as suggested in the text, or as these appeared in any versions you have seen in performance. You should consider effects of language and imagery, in context. Below are some ideas, which could form the outline of a response to the plays. You may find these helpful; ignore those that aren't.

When you (speak or) write about the play, you must refer to evidence: either quote dialogue, or explain what is happening in terms of action. Ideally, you should give Act and Scene (Roman [e.g. III, ii] or Arabic [e.g. 3.2] numbers) and line numbers (not page numbers - do you know why?). Always comment on, or explain the point of, what you quote. Do not write the verb **quote** at any point in your work, unless it is to explain that one character in the play quotes another! In formal written English, **quote** is a verb and **quotation** is the corresponding noun. **Quote** as a noun is fine in speech, especially when referring to an estimate for work to be done (builder's quote).

The two plays were first performed at around the same time in the 1590s. They have obvious similarities of plot and theme, but clearly different structure and outcome. Briefly (no more than half a page) summarise these similarities and differences.

### 'The course of true love never did run smooth'

How far are Lysander's words proved true by the (total) events in either play? Are they a more suitable motto for one than the other? Why?

### Puck and Oberon versus Friar Laurence and the Nurse

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Puck and Oberon watch over the young lovers (and Bottom) and save them from coming to any harm. Explain how they are able to do this, through their magical powers. In *Romeo and Juliet* the Friar and the Nurse try to help the tragic lovers but fail to save them. Compare their efforts to help Romeo and Juliet with the efforts of Puck and Oberon. How and why are the fairies successful where human helpers fail? Compare the Friar's use of magical or seeming magical herbs with Oberon's use of magical plants (Cupid's flower and Dian's bud).

### 'Tis almost fairy time'

In both plays characters refer to fairies. The longest speech in *Romeo and Juliet* (spoken by Mercutio) is a description of Queen Mab, the 'fairies' midwife', but he admits to making it up. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Theseus refers jokingly to 'fairy time', but may well not believe in fairies any more than Romeo and Mercutio. What difference do the fairies make to the comic world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* compared to the harsher view of the world that we see in *Romeo and Juliet*?

AM

## Verona and Athens

In both plays, the place where the action occurs is important. Comment on the various settings within each play, and explain what it has to do with what happens. (In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* look at Athens and the Palace Wood outside the city; in *Romeo and Juliet* look at the city square in Verona, Capulet's house and garden, the Friar's cell, Mantua, and the Capulet tomb.)

## Tragedy and comedy

Try to explain what these terms mean, as descriptions of types of play, when we apply them to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Try to refer to their structure, theme and mood.

## Fathers and daughters

In both plays we find heroines (Juliet and Hermia) who are subject to the authority of their fathers. In one play we see a father begin by giving his daughter a lot of freedom, and end by removing it from her; in the other, we see a father try to control his daughter's life for most of the play, but who is reconciled to her near its end. Comment on these relationships, as you see them in the two plays. (Pyramus and Thisbe also supposedly have tyrannical parents).

## Contrast

Both plays exploit obvious contrasts for theatrical effect. Among these are light and dark (or day and night), love and hate and the upper and lower ends of the social scale. Explain how any of these work to make the drama more effective.

## Order and disorder

This is a contrast of theme you will find in almost any of Shakespeare's plays. In both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* we see rulers (Theseus/Oberon and Prince Escalus) try to restore or maintain order, in the face of disruptive or anarchic behaviour. Show how this appears in each play, and how important it is to the play's central themes. In each play there are figures who represent disorder (Bottom and Puck; Mercutio and Tybalt). Explain how these challenge the rulers' attempts to preserve order in their domains (territory).

## Pyramus and Thisbe

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the workmen's Lamentable Comedy can be seen as a parody (silly copy) of *Romeo and Juliet*. There are obvious similarities in the plot (can you say what these are?) but not in the theatrical qualities of the two pieces. In *Pyramus and Thisbe* we see how not to do things which are done much better elsewhere in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in *Romeo and Juliet* or in other plays by Shakespeare. (These include depicting wild animals, a wall, moonlight and killing on stage). Comment on how these things are done both in *Pyramus and Thisbe* and in the plays proper. Comment on how hard or easy it is for actors to speak the dialogue in Shakespeare's plays generally and to speak the verse we meet

Originally published on [www.universalteacher.org.uk](http://www.universalteacher.org.uk), Andrew Moore's teaching resource site.  
This free PDF version is available from [www.teachit.co.uk](http://www.teachit.co.uk). © Andrew Moore, 1999-2005.

AM

in *Pyramus and Thisbe* (look at the end of the Prologue, and the dying speeches of the two lovers). Explain how the workmen's play is a good commentary on young lovers who take themselves too seriously.

## The plays in performance

Comment on how the plays were presented in the versions you have seen. Was it a cinema, TV or stage performance? Comment on such things as costume, props and action; you may also refer to lighting, music, SFX, and anything else which caught your interest. If you were to direct (in a given medium - stage, TV, cinema) how would **you** approach these things?

## Conclusion

Explain what you like about either play or both. Say how well they work in performance, and what kind of response they provoke in the audience.

Remember to present your work attractively, with illustrations (for example, to show costume or props) and any diagrams (ideas for staging) to clarify your ideas.