**BACKGROUND INFO**

**AUTHOR BIO**

Full Name: William Shakespeare  
Date of Birth: 1564  
Place of Birth: Stratford-upon-Avon, England  
Date of Death: 1616  
Brief Life Story: Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

**KEY FACTS**

Full Title: The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet  
Genre: Tragic drama  
Setting: The Italian cities of Verona and Mantua during the Renaissance (around the fourteenth century).  
Climax: Romeo and Juliet's double suicide in the Capulet tomb.  
Protagonists: Romeo and Juliet  
Antagonists: There are many antagonists to Romeo and Juliet's love. The most important include the feud between the Capulets and Montagues; Tybalt; the Prince, citizens, and laws of Verona; and fate.

**HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT**

When Written: early to mid 1590s  
Where Written: England  
When Published: 1597  
Literary Period: The Renaissance (1500-1660)  
Related Literary Works: As with many other of his plays, Shakespeare adapted his version of Romeo and Juliet from earlier sources. Shakespeare's most direct source was an English narrative poem published in 1562 by Arthur Brooke, which was itself based on a French version of an Italian story. Shakespeare's play and Brooke's poem share many similarities of plot, including how Romeo and Juliet met and died. However, while the plots are similar, Brooke's version is generally considered to be plodding, while Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is one of the most exciting plays ever written. Shakespeare transformed the story in a variety of ways. Three of the most important include cramming a plot that in Brooke's poem took nine months to unfold into just four frenetic days, having Tybalt kill Mercutio, and having Romeo and Juliet's wedding day occur on the same day that Romeo is banished. But just as important in creating the ecstatic intensity of Romeo and Juliet is the unparalleled power of Shakespeare's language. In addition to its similarity to earlier versions of the Romeo and Juliet story, Shakespeare's play is also similar to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which was best told by the Roman poet Ovid in his Metamorphoses. Shakespeare was not only aware of the similarity between the stories of Romeo and Juliet and Pyramus and Thisbe, he explicitly references Pyramus and Thisbe within Romeo and Juliet.

**EXTRA CREDIT**

Shakespeare or Not? There are some who believe Shakespeare wasn't educated enough to write the plays attributed to him. The most common anti-Shakespeare theory is that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and used Shakespeare as a front man because aristocrats were not supposed to write plays. Yet the evidence supporting Shakespeare's authorship far outweighs any evidence against. So until further notice, Shakespeare is still the most influential writer in the English language.

**PLOT SUMMARY**

In Verona, Italy, during the Renaissance, two noble families, the Montagues and Capulets, are locked in a bitter feud. After a series of public brawls between both the nobles and the servants of the two families, Prince Escalus, the ruler of Verona, declares that anyone in either family involved in any future fighting will be put to death.

Every year the Capulets throw a masquerade ball. The Montagues, of course, are not invited. Capulet and Lady Capulet, hope that this year their daughter Juliet will fall in love with Paris at the ball, since at thirteen she is almost of marriageable age and Paris would be a good match. But two Montagues, sixteen-year-old Romeo and his cousin Benvolio, along with their friend Mercutio, a kinsmen of Prince Escalus, crash the party. Romeo attends the party only because he wants to see Rosaline, a young woman he has been unsuccessfully pursuing for quite some time. That lack of success has made him noticeably lovelorn of late. But at first sight of Juliet, Romeo falls in love. Juliet is equally smitten. They speak, and kiss. As the party ends Romeo and Juliet separately discover that they belong to rival families, and are both distraught. Yet Romeo is already so in love that instead of leaving the Capulet's residence with his friends, he jumps a wall and hides beneath her balcony. Suddenly she emerges, and tells the night sky about her forbidden love for Romeo. Romeo jumps out from his hiding place. They exchange vows of love. The next day, with the help of Friar Laurence and Juliet's Nurse, Romeo and Juliet are secretly married.

That same day, Benvolio and Mercutio encounter Tybalt, who is Juliet's cousin. Tybalt is furious that the Montagues crashed the Capulet party (he spotted, Juliet separately discover that they belong to rival families, and are both distraught. Yet Romeo is already so in love that instead of leaving the Capulet's residence with his friends, he jumps a wall and hides beneath her balcony. Suddenly she emerges, and tells the night sky about her forbidden love for Romeo. Romeo jumps out from his hiding place. They exchange vows of love. The next day, with the help of Friar Laurence and Juliet's Nurse, Romeo and Juliet are secretly married.

Because Romeo at first tried to stop the fighting, instead of ordering him executed the Prince banishes him from Verona. Juliet is devastated when she learns that Romeo killed her cousin, but she decides that her loyalty must be with her husband. That night Romeo comes to her room and the lovers are able to spend one glorious night together before Romeo, at dawn, must flee Verona to Mantua.

The death of Tybalt affects Lord Capulet deeply. He decides to marry Juliet immediately. Juliet refuses. Capulet threatens to disown her. Lady Capulet in love with Paris, and Capulet sides with her husband, and even the Nurse advises Juliet to marry Paris and forget Romeo. Juliet rushes to Friar Laurence, who comes up with a plan: he gives her a potion that will make it seem like she's died but will really only put her to sleep. She will be laid to rest in the Capulet tomb, and there will wake up. Meanwhile, the Friar promises to get news to Romeo so that he'll secretly return from Mantua and be there when she wakes up. She follows the Friar's advice. The next morning the Capulet household wakes to discover Juliet has died. Instead of a wedding, they have a funeral. Juliet's body is put in the tomb. But the Friar's letter to Romeo goes astray. Romeo hears only that Juliet has died. In despair, Romeo poisons and, after fighting and killing a grieving
Paris, sneaks into Juliet's tomb. In the tomb, Romeo gazes on what he thinks is the dead body of his beloved, drinks the poison, and dies. Seconds later, Juliet wakes. She sees Romeo's body. Friar Laurence rushes into the cell too late. He tells Juliet what happened, but hears people approaching. He begs Juliet to come with him, but she refuses. He flees. In order to be with Romeo, Juliet kills herself with his dagger.

The Montagues and Capulets are grief-stricken when they learn the truth. They agree to end their feud.

**CHARACTERS**

**Romeo** — The sixteen-year-old son of Montague and Lady Montague. He is cousins with Benvolio, and friends with Mercutio and Friar Laurence. Romeo's defining characteristic is the intensity of his emotions—whether in anger, love, or despair. Romeo is also intelligent, quick-witted, loved by his friends, and not a bad swordsman. Over the course of the play, Romeo grows from an adolescent who claims to be in love with Rosaline, but in reality seems more in love with the idea of love and with being a miserable wretch in the mold of classical love poets, to a young man who shares a deep and passionate love with Juliet and is willing to face the obstacles of friends, family, the law, fate, and, ultimately, death in order to be with her.

**Juliet** — The beautiful thirteen-year-old daughter of Capulet and Lady Capulet, and cousins with Tybalt. The Nurse is her closest friend and advisor. Juliet is naive and sheltered at the beginning of the play, and has given almost no thought to love. But as soon as she meets and falls in love with Romeo she quickly develops into a woman of remarkable strength and resolve in pursuing what she wants. Like Romeo, she is willing to face all obstacles of society, fate, and death to be with her love. Yet even while head over heels in love, Juliet remains more grounded than Romeo. She even calls him on his silliness when he gets overly poetic. It seems possible to attribute much of Romeo's transformation from a callous youth to a passionate lover to Juliet's influence.

**Benvolio** — Montague's nephew, Lady Montague's husband, and Benvolio's uncle. The leader of the Montague household, and quick to anger at his bitter rival, Capulet.

**Lady Montague** — Montague's wife and Romeo's mother. She barely appears in the play.

**Friar John** — A Franciscan friar.

**Balthasar** — Romeo's servant.

**Samson and Gregory** — Capulet servants.

**Abraham** — Montague's servant.

**Peter** — An illiterate Capulet servant.

**The Apothecary** — A poor apothecary (a drug seller) in Mantua.

**Rosaline** — A young woman who has taken a vow of chastity, yet with whom Romeo is infatuated at the beginning of the play.

**The Chorus** — An on-stage commentator on the events of the play (usually a single person).

**THEMES**

**LOVE**

Love in Romeo and Juliet is not some pretty, idealized emotion. Yes, the love Romeo and Juliet share is beautiful and passionate. It is pure, exhilarating, and transformative, and they are willing to give everything to it. But it is also chaotic and destructive, bringing death to friends, family, and to themselves. Over and over in the play, Romeo and Juliet's love is mentioned in connection with death and violence, and finds it's greatest expression in their suicide.

The theme of love in Romeo and Juliet also extends beyond the love that Romeo and Juliet feel for each other. All the characters in the play constantly talk about love. Mercutio thinks love is little more than an excuse to pursue sexual pleasure and that it makes a man weak and dumb. Lady Capulet thinks love is based on material things; Paris is handsome and wealthy; therefore Lady Capulet believes Juliet will love him. Lord Capulet sees love as obedience and duty. Friar Laurence knows that love may be passionate, but argues that it's also a responsibility. Paris seems to think that love is at his command, since he tells Juliet that she loves him. In short, love is everywhere in Romeo and Juliet, and everyone sees it differently.

**FATE**

From the opening prologue when the Chorus summarizes Romeo and Juliet 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.

Fate is not just a force felt by the characters in Romeo and Juliet. The audience also senses it through Shakespeare's use of foreshadowing. Time and again, both Romeo and Juliet unknowingly reference their imminent deaths, as when Juliet says after first meeting Romeo: "If he be married / My grave is like to be my wedding bed." She means that if Romeo is already married she'll be miserable. But the audience knows that Juliet's grave actually comes with him, but she refuses. He flees. In order to be with Romeo, Juliet kills herself with his dagger. In Romeo and Juliet, fate is a force that neither the characters nor the audience can escape, and so every word and gesture gains in power, becomes fateful.

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INDIVIDUALS VS. SOCIETY

Because of their forbidden love, Romeo and Juliet are forced into conflict with the social world around them: family, friends, political authority, and even religion. The lovers try to avoid this conflict by hiding, by escaping from it. They prefer the privacy of nighttime to the public world of day. They volunteer to give up their names, their social identities, in order to be together. They begin to keep secrets and speak in puns so that they can publicly say one thing while meaning another. On the morning after their marriage, they even go so far as to pretend that day is night so they won't have to part.

But no one can stop day from dawning, and in the end Romeo and Juliet can't escape the responsibilities of the public world. Romeo tries to stop being a Montague and avoid fighting Tybalt, but fails. Juliet tries to stop being a Capulet and to stand up to her father when he tries to marry her off to Paris, but is abandoned by her mother and the Nurse. Romeo is banished from Verona by Prince Escalus, who embodies political law. Finally, to preserve their love, Romeo and Juliet are forced to the ultimate act of independence and privacy: suicide.

LANGUAGE AND WORD PLAY

Romeo and Juliet constantly play with language. They pun, rhyme, and speak in double entendres. All these word games may seem like mere fun, and they are fun. The characters that pun and play with language have fun doing it. But word play in Romeo and Juliet has a deeper purpose: rebellion. Romeo and Juliet play with language to escape the world. They claim they are not a Montague and a Capulet; they use words to try to transform day, for a moment, into night; they hide their love even while secretly admitting it. Other characters play with language too. In particular, Mercutio and the Nurse make constant sexual puns implying that while everyone is running around talking about high ideals like honor and love, sex and other base desires are at the root of human existence.

So language in Romeo and Juliet serves two opposing purposes. It allows some characters to escape the world into intense love, while it allows other characters to reveal that the world of love, honor, and high ideals are just masks people use to cover their animal instincts.

SERVANTS

For a play about the two noble teenagers struggling to preserve their forbidden love, Romeo and Juliet sure has a lot of scenes focused on servants and non-nobles. Shakespeare did this by design. The recurring presence of the play, from Peter, the Capulet servant who can't read, to the apothecary who's so poor he's willing to sell poison, Shakespeare in Romeo and Juliet goes to great efforts to show that the poor and downtrodden have lives of their own, and that to them Romeo and Juliet's love and death mean absolutely nothing. After all, why would the death of two noble teenagers mean anything to servants just trying to make it through the day and scrounge up something to eat for dinner?

SYMBOLS

LIGHT/DARK AND DAY/NIGHT

Romeo and Juliet is filled with imagery of light and dark. But while light is traditionally connected with "good" and dark with "evil," in Romeo and Juliet the relationship is more complex. Romeo and Juliet constantly see each other as forms of light. In the balcony scene, Romeo describes Juliet as the sun, while Juliet describes Romeo as stars. But the relationship between light and dark is complicated by the lover's need for the privacy of darkness in order to be together. As Romeo says when the sun dawns on the morning when he is to be banished from Verona, "More light and light, more dark and dark our woes!" So while Romeo and Juliet see each other as light, in order for their light to shine brightly it needs the contrast of darkness, of night, to make it powerful.

QUOTES

PROLOGUE QUOTES

Two households, both alike in dignity, In fair Verona, where we lay our scene, From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean, From forth the fatal loins of these two foes, A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life; Whose misadventured piteous overthrows, Doth with their death bury their parents' strife. The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love, And the continuance of their parents' rage, Which, but their children's end, nought could remove, Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage; The which if you with patient ears attend, What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

ACT 1 QUOTES


Why then, O brawling love! O loving hate! O any thing, of nothing first created; O heavy lightness! serious vanity! Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeing forms! (166)

Romeo: I dream'd a dream to-night. Mercutio: And so did I. Romeo: I dream'd a dream to-night. Mercutio: That dreamers often lie. (50)

O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you. She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes In shape no bigger than an agate-stone On the fore-finger of an alderman, Drawn with a team of little atoms A throng of little fays doth run. (53)

Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright! It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear, Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear. So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows. The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand, And, touching hers, make blessèd my rude hand. Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night. (42)

You kiss by th'book. (109)
My only love sprung from my only hate!
Too early seen unknown, and known too late! (138)

ACT 2 QUOTES

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun! (2)

O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet. (33)

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy; —
Thou art thyself though, not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? That which we call a rose,
By any other word would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title: — Romeo, doff thy name;
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself. (38)

I take thee at thy word:
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptis'd;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo. (49)

O, swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable. (109)

Good-night, good-night! Parting is such sweet sorrow
That I shall say good-night till it be morrow. (187)

For naught so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give;
Nor aught so good but, strain'd from that fair use,
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on the abuse:
Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied;
And vice sometimes by action dignified. (17)

ACT 3 QUOTES

Romeo, the hate I bear thee can afford
No better term than this: thou art a villain. (31)

Romeo: Courage, man; the hurt cannot be much.
Mercutio: No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door; but 'tis
**PROLOGUE**

The Chorus delivers a fourteen line sonnet, in which it states the topic of the play. In the city of Verona, there are two noble houses that hold an "ancient grudge" against each other, resulting in bloody clashes. From these two houses will emerge two "star-crossed" lovers (1.3-6). The lovers will heal the rift between their families by dying.

**ACT 1, SCENE 1**

Two Capulet servants, Gregory and Samson, enter. They brag about what they would do if they saw a Montague. Suddenly they see Abraham, a Montague servant. They want to fight, but don't want to start the fight so that the law is on their side. Samson insults Abraham by biting his thumb. Abraham draws his sword.

Benvolio arrives and tries to stop the fighting. Tybalt arrives and insults Benvolio and all Montagues. Soon they're all battling. Montague and Capulet also try to join the fight, but their wives hold them back.

The brawl halts only when Prince Escalus arrives with members of the Civil Watch. Escalus proclaims that any Montague or Capulet who disturbs the peace in the future will be put to death.

As Benvolio and Montague discuss the fight a little later, Lady Montague says she's glad that Romeo, her son, wasn't involved. Benvolio says that just before dawn he saw Romeo looking melancholy in a grove of sycamore trees. None of them know why Romeo has seemed so sad recently. Just then they see Romeo approaching. Montague and Lady Montague exit, to let Benvolio speak with Romeo alone.

Benvolio learns from Romeo that he is in love with Rosaline, a woman who has taken an oath of chastity. Romeo makes poetic pronouncements about love, and speaks in clichés about its paradoxes: "feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health" (1.1.174).

Benvolio advises Romeo to find someone else to love. Romeo walks off, saying that he can't forget Rosaline. Benvolio vows to help him forget her.

**ACT 1, SCENE 2**

Capulet and Paris, a kinsmen of Prince Escalus, discuss Paris's wish to marry Capulet's daughter. Juliet Capulet says Juliet is too young to marry—she's not yet fourteen. Still, he urges Paris to woo her and win her heart. After all, Capulet says, while he wants Juliet to marry Paris, it's more important that she want to marry him.

Capulet invites Paris to the annual Capulet masquerade being held that night.

As they exit, Capulet sends a servant, Peter, to deliver the rest of the invitations. But Peter can't read. Just then, Romeo and Benvolio happen along. Peter asks them if they'll read the list of invitations aloud for him. Romeo reads the list. In thanks, Peter invites them to the masquerade, as long as they aren't Montagues, of course. Peter exits.

Benvolio notes that Rosaline was one of the names on the list. He suggests they crash the party so Romeos can see his love isn't anything special compared to the other beauties there. Romeo agrees to go just to prove Benvolio wrong.

**ACT 1, SCENE 3**

Just before the masquerade, Lady Capulet asks the Nurse to find Juliet. Juliet enters. Lady Capulet dismisses the Nurse, then immediately calls her back. The Nurse then tells a story about Juliet as a baby, in which the Nurse's now dead husband implicated an unknowing Juliet in a sexual joke. Lady Capulet can't quiet the Nurse, but Juliet finally does.

Lady Capulet asks Juliet what she thinks about marriage. Juliet says she hasn't thought about it. Lady Capulet responds that at Juliet's age she had already given birth to Juliet. She reveals that Paris seeks to marry Juliet and says that if Juliet marries him she will "share all that he doth possess" (1.3.95).

Juliet says she'll look at Paris to see if she could love him, but won't look any more deeply than her mother instructs.

Of course, the audience knows Romeo is wrong: the play's title makes it clear Juliet is his fate.
ACT 1, SCENE 4

Romeo, Benvolio, and their friend Mercutio (a kinsmen of Prince Escalus), walk toward the Capulet’s ball. Romeo, still melancholy, says he won’t dance at the party. Mercutio makes fun of Romeo, twisting all his comments about love into sexual metaphors.

Romeo says he dreamed that going to the feast was a bad idea.

Mercutio launches into a speech about dreams and Queen Mab, the Queen of Fairies. The speech begins as a kind of fairy-tale, with Queen Mab bringing dreams in her carriage made from a walnut. But the dreams become more and more nightmarish, revealing men's greed, violence, and sexual desire. Mercutio works himself into a fervor. Romeo breaks in and calms him down.

Benvolio breaks in to say they’ll be late if they don’t hurry. Romeo again says he has a bad feeling. But he senses that the events of the night will set fate in motion and result in his untimely death. But he shrugs it off and follows his friends.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

At the masquerade, servants bustle, complain, and save a little marzipan for themselves.

Romeo catches sight of Juliet. He doesn’t know who she is, but immediately forgets Rosaline. He says that Juliet teaches the “torches to burn bright!” (1.5.41). At the same time, Tybalt recognizes Romeo and prepares to attack this party-crashing Montague.

Capulet, furious that Tybalt would ruin the party, stops him. Once Capulet is gone, Tybalt secretly vows revenge, and exits.

Romeo approaches Juliet. Their entire first conversation is an interwoven fourteen line sonnet, in which they develop a complicated religious metaphor that Romeo guides into a first kiss, and which Juliet comments that Romeo kisses “by the book” (1.5.107).

In the famous Queen Mab speech, Mercutio reveals the dark desires that hide behind mankind’s pretty ideals, and his own revulsion at this subterfuge. He also shows his wit with words and a tendency to get carried furiously away.

Romeo gives himself to fate.

Mercutio thinks little of love. He uses puns to show love is nothing more than a pretty excuse to chase sex. Mercutio’s banter also shows how friends exert social pressure.

Fate and foreshadowing.

The Nurse interrupts, calling Juliet to her mother. Romeo learns from the Nurse that Juliet’s a Capulet. Moments later, Juliet says about Romeo, as the Nurse goes to find out who he is, “If he be married, my grave is like to be my wedding bed” (1.5.131-132). The Nurse reports Romeo’s a Montague.

Just as they fall in love, R and J discover the main social forces—their families—opposing them. Juliet simultaneously foreshadows her fate: when Romeo gets married, Juliet’s grave does become her wedding bed.

ACT 2, PROLOGUE

In another sonnet, the Chorus describes the obstacles facing the new love between Romeo and Juliet, but also says that “passion lends them power” (2.p.13).

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Instead of leaving the party with Benvolio and Mercutio, Romeo jumps the wall into the Capulet garden to try to find Juliet. Benvolio and Mercutio call after him, and Mercutio laughingly mocks Romeo’s passion and love for Rosaline. Finally, they give up and leave.

Just then, Romeo sees Juliet walk out onto a balcony. In a whisper he compares her to the sun, and hides beneath her balcony.

Romeo emerges from his hiding place, startling Juliet. She says that if Romeo is noticed he’ll be killed, but Romeo responds that he would rather die than live without her love.

Juliet speaks: she asks why Romeo must be Romeo. She asks him to forswear his name, to give up being a Montague, then offers to give up being a Capulet if Romeo will love her.

Juliet tries to use language, name-changing, to escape from the social world in order to love freely.

As the Nurse calls from Juliet’s room, Juliet hurriedly asks Romeo, if his “love be honorable” (2.1.185), to send her word tomorrow whether he will marry her. He tells her to send the Nurse to him at nine. They exchange more hurried words of love, then exit.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

As dawn breaks, Friar Laurence collects herbs outside his cell. He muses on the fact that everything on Earth, from herbs to virtues, has some special good, but that any of those things, if misapplied or used in excess, can cause disaster.

Friar’s thoughts on the importance of moderation prove fateful, given the destruction that R and J’s passion causes.
Romeo rushes into Friar Laurence’s cell. Friar Laurence immediately sees that Romeo did not sleep that night, and is alarmed that Romeo might have slept in sin with Rosaline. But Romeo says he has forgotten Rosaline, and describes his love for Juliet and his desire to marry her.

The Friar is suspicious of Romeo’s sudden switch from Rosaline to Juliet. Romeo responds that Juliet, unlike Rosaline, returns his love. The Friar comments that Rosaline knew Romeo’s “love did read by rote, that could not spell” (2.2.86).

But Friar Laurence also sees an opportunity to end the feud between the Montagues and Capulets, and agrees to marry Romeo and Juliet.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Benvolio and Mercutio wonder what happened to Romeo the previous night. Benvolio mentions that Tybalt has challenged Romeo to a duel. In a display of verbal wit, Mercutio mocks Tybalt as a “Prince of Cats” (2.3.17) who follows honor to a ridiculous degree. But he admits Tybalt is a good swordsman.

Romeo appears. Mercutio mockingly compares Rosaline to all the great heroines of classical literature, Romeo and Mercutio then engage in an epic banter match, throwing back and forth their wit and sexual double entendres. Finally, Mercutio breaks off and says in great joy, “Now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo” (2.3.77).

The Nurse appears, looking for Romeo. For fun, Mercutio compares the Nurse to a prostitute for a while, then goes off with Benvolio to get lunch.

The Nurse threatens some dire response if Romeo means to mislead Juliet. But Romeo says that if Juliet can get to Friar Laurence’s cell, she will be married. He also plans with the Nurse to set a rope ladder to Juliet’s room, so he can climb to her room for their wedding night.

The Friar’s comments on moderation contrast with Romeo’s youthful insistence on speed and extreme emotion above all else.

Another clue that before Juliet, Romeo’s “love” came from copying romantic poetry rather than experience.

Though he preaches moderation, Friar Laurence gets caught up in his own big dreams of creating peace.

Mercutio’s mockery shows similarities between Tybalt and Romeo. Romeo loves love, Tybalt loves honor. Mercutio thinks they’re both fools, though he likens Romeo and hates Tybalt.

This is a glimpse of who Romeo was before he became obsessed with love: a kid with a wit as quick and wicked as Mercutio’s. Mercutio believes this bantering Romeo is the “true” Romeo.

Here’s an example of casual verbal abuse of lower-classes by nobles, even if in good fun.

The Nurse is determined to protect both Juliet’s honor and her heart. Romeo shows he is honorable.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Juliet waits impatiently for the Nurse to return, and maligns “old folks” as “unwieldy, slow, heavy, and pale as lead” (2.4.14–15). Finally, the Nurse arrives. At first, the Nurse pretends she’s too tired to talk in order to extort a back rub from Juliet. Then she relents and tells an ecstatic Juliet to get to Friar Laurence’s cell to be married.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

Friar Laurence and Romeo wait for Juliet. Romeo is so excited he says that no matter what sorrow might come, it cannot compare to his joy. The Friar counsels moderation in everything, including love, saying “These violent delights have violent ends” (2.5.9).

Juliet arrives, and Romeo asks her to describe her love for him. But Juliet refuses. She comments that “They are but beggars that can count their worth” (2.5.32). She says her love is too large to describe.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

The following day is boiling hot. Benvolio tells Mercutio they should get off the streets: the hot weather is bound to cause hot tempers. Just then, Tybalt enters with some other Capulets. Tybalt and Mercutio quickly start insulting each other and seem close to drawing swords. Benvolio tries to calm them.

Romeo appears. Tybalt calls Romeo a “villain,” but Romeo refuses to duel, saying that he loves Tybalt, and that the name Capulet is as dear as his own.

Mercutio, furious that Romeo refuses to stand up for himself, challenges Tybalt. They draw their swords and begin to fight. Romeo steps between them to stop the fighting, but Tybalt stabs Mercutio under Romeo’s arm. Tybalt and the Capulets rush off. Mercutio dies, cursing both Montagues and Capulets: “A plague o’ both your houses” (3.1.86).

Romeo says to himself that love for Juliet has made him “effeminate.” Tybalt returns. Romeo avenges Mercutio by fighting and killing Tybalt. As the Watch and Prince Escalus approach, Romeo flees.

Romeo, as a man, can go out into the world and act. Juliet, as a woman, must wait at home.

Romeo calls Romeo on his overly-poetic love. She makes him see that love is bigger than just saying the words.

Romeo tries to avoid or deny obligations of the social world with love...

...but Romeo’s love becomes warped by the social world, and results in the death of his friend. Mercutio’s dying curse on the Capulets and Montagues can be seen as both foreshadowing and fate.

Romeo realizes he can’t live by love in the social world of men. He avenges Mercutio’s death, as honor dictates he must.
ACT 3, SCENE 2

Juliet begs nightfall to hurry in its coming, and to bring Romeo with it. She imagines that when she dies, Romeo will be immortalized as stars in heaven.

The Nurse runs in crying and shouting, "He's dead!" (3.2.36). Juliet thinks Romeo has killed himself, and threatens to kill herself.

The Nurse in her grief starts calling out Tybalt's name. Juliet realizes there's been a mistake. The Nurse tells her Romeo killed Tybalt and has been banished. Juliet laments that Romeos could seem such an angel and be such a devil. The Nurse curses him. But Juliet cuts the Nurse off, and chides herself for speaking ill of Romeo. Romeo is her husband, and her loyalty and love are with him.

Juliet tells the Nurse to find Romeo and bid him come that night gives R and J the privacy they need to love.

Even as the social world seems to conspire against them, night gives R and J the privacy they need to love.

Night and privacy are here linked with love.

Juliet demonstrates her own willingness to die for love.

Juliet chooses Romeo over her family. In the balcony scene she offered to give up her name. Her decision here to support Romeo shows that she now really has given it up. She supports her husband, a Montague, over her cousin, a Capulet.

Romeo's argument about love with Friar Laurence boils down to youth and passion vs. age and moderation.

Romeo continues to link his passionate love to violence and suicide. It is, of course, another instance of foreshadowing. But it makes the point that Romeo's character drives his fate...

...so no matter how reasonable the Friar's plan might be, it's bound to not work out.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

It is just before dawn. Capulet, Lady Capulet, and Paris have stayed up late, discussing Juliet and the tragedy of Tybalt's death. Paris turns to go, but Capulet suddenly calls him back. Capulet says he wants Paris and Juliet to marry, and thinks her heart "will be ruled in all respects by me" (3.4.14). He suggests the marriage be held on Wednesday. Then, realizing its Monday, he says Wednesday's too soon and moves the Wedding back to Thursday. Paris is overjoyed. Capulet instructs Lady Capulet to tell Juliet about her imminent wedding.

Juliet stops pretending. She says it's her day and Romeo must go.

The Nurse enters and warns that Lady Capulet is approaching Juliet's room. Romeo hurries down the rope ladder. To Juliet, standing on her balcony, it looks as if Romeo is descending into a tomb.

Later Romeo and Juliet tried to rename things in the world to stop the day from dawning.

Perfect example of the social world interfering in Romeo and Juliet's love, leading to a foreshadowing of their fate.

Juliet uses language to hide her meaning from her mother. Word play can keep private thoughts safe from the public world.

Yet Juliet can only hide from the public world; she can't overcome it. As a daughter, she has no right or ability to stand up to her father. Note how furious Capulet gets at the mere suggestion of disobedience.

Just as Friar Laurence can't understand Romeo's passion, the Nurse can't understand Juliet's. The Nurse thinks one handsome man is as good as another. Juliet, in contrast, insists on the uniqueness of her love with Romeo.
**ACT 4, SCENE 1**

**Paris** is talking with **Friar Laurence** to prepare for the wedding. On Thursday, Friar Laurence says it's all happening too fast and that he's concerned that Paris doesn't even know if **Juliet** wants to marry him.

**Juliet** arrives. **Paris** greets her as his wife. Paris is loving, but condescending, assuming that she loves him. Juliet is evasive and mocks Paris without his realizing it. Friar Laurence steps in saying it is time for Juliet's confession.

Once they're alone, **Juliet** draws a dagger and threatens to kill herself unless the Friar can help her.

**Friar Laurence** quickly comes up with a plan: he gives **Juliet** a potion that, for forty-two hours, will put her into a sleep so deep it will appear as if she has died. He tells her to agree to marry **Paris** Thursday, but to take the potion Wednesday night. Instead of a wedding, the Capulets will hold a funeral, and inter Juliet in their family tomb. Meanwhile, the friar will get word to **Romeo**, who will come to the tomb in time to be there when she wakes, and the two of them will together go to Mantua.

**ACT 4, SCENE 2**

At the Capulet's home, preparations for the wedding are in full swing. **Juliet** returns from Friar Laurence's cell with a smile on her face. She "repent[s] of the sin of disobedient opposition" (4.2.17) and begs for her father to forgive her.

**Capulet** is overjoyed. In fact, he's so happy that over his wife's objections he decides to move the wedding up a day to Wednesday, which is tomorrow. **Juliet** and **Nurse** go to Juliet's room to pick out clothes for tomorrow.

Earlier, Juliet had been using language to make one thing sound like another. Now she's lying outright to her parents.

It is ironic, and fateful, that Juliet's fake joy convinces Capulet to move the wedding forward a day.

**ACT 4, SCENE 3**

After selecting clothes for the wedding, **Juliet** asks the **Nurse** and **Lady Capulet** to let her spend the night before her wedding alone.

**Juliet** needs privacy to take her stand against society.

**ACT 4, SCENE 4**

As the Capulet household readiness for the wedding the following morning, **Capulet** sends the **Nurse** to wake **Juliet**. But Juliet is dead. The Nurse, Lady Capulet, and Capulet cry out in grief. Just then, **Paris** and **Friar Laurence** arrive with musicians. Paris joins in the mourning. But Friar Laurence chides them. He says that Juliet is now happy in heaven, and says they must prepare the funeral. The Capulets, Paris, the Nurse, and Friar Laurence all exit.

The sudden exit of the Capulets leaves the musicians all alone. **Peter** requests that they play a happy song to lessen his sadness, but they refuse because Peter has no money to pay them. This leads to a confrontation with a furious Peter, but the magicians don't give in. After Peter leaves, the musicians decide to stick around for a while to see if they can get a free lunch at the funeral reception.

**ACT 5, SCENE 1**

**Romeo**, in Mantua, contemplates a happy dream he's had: **Juliet** found him dead, and brought him back to life by kissing him. As Romeo muses on love, **Balthasar**, Romeo's servant, arrives with news: Juliet is dead. Balthasar saw her laid to rest in the Capulet tomb.

**Romeo** shouts, "Then I defy you, stars" (5.1.24). He orders Balthasar to get him paper and ink for a note, and to hire some horses. Balthasar asks Romeo to calm down and be patient—he says that Romeo's "pale and wild" looks signify that Romeo is about to do something rash. Romeo assures Balthasar that he won't do anything crazy. Balthasar exits to get the paper and the horses.

Once they leave, she picks up the vial of potion that Friar Laurence gave her. Suddenly nervous, she thinks about what might go wrong with Friar Laurence's plan: what if the Friar means to murder her to hide his participation in her marriage to **Romeo**? What if she wakes up in the vault before Romeo arrives, and goes insane because she is surrounded by death and skeletons?

Juliet sees a vision of Tybalt chasing **Romeo**, yet lifts the vial, toasts to Romeo, and drinks.

The Friar's chiding of the Capulets for immoderate grief mirrors his advice to Romeo about immoderate passion. But now Friar Laurence is using his advice to lie. Even if he's doing it to help Juliet, it seems a pretty un-friarlike thing to do.

A noblewoman has apparently died on her wedding day, and musicians are wondering if it means they won't get lunch. The musicians, who work for their living, have to care about their own well-being.

**Romeo**'s dream is the opposite of what happens. Rather than bring him back to life, in act 5, scene 3 Juliet kisses his lips to try to join him in death.

Romeo seeks to deny fate by joining Juliet in death, but is actually playing into fate's hands. Part of the genius of Romeo and Juliet is how its characters' personalities determine their fates. Also, note how Romeo, like Juliet did before, has now started to lie to protect his privacy.

**Romeo**'s dream is the opposite of what happens. Rather than bring him back to life, in act 5, scene 3 Juliet kisses his lips to try to join him in death.
Romeo addresses Juliet, telling her "I will lie with thee tonight" (5.1.34). He finds a poor apothecary, and asks the man to sell him poison. The apothecary says Mantua has a death penalty against anyone who sells poison. Romeo says the apothecary should not pay any attention to the law, since there is no law that protects the apothecary from his poverty. The apothecary sells Romeo poison, saying "My poverty but not my will consents" (5.1.75). Romeo takes the poison and heads off to Verona and the Capulet tomb.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Friar John, who Friar Laurence had sent to tell Romeo the plan about Juliet's fake death, returns. He explains that he never made it to Mantua because an outbreak of the plague put him in quarantine. Friar Laurence writes another letter to Romeo, then rushes off to free Juliet from the Capulet tomb.

Fate can be a bummer.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Outside the Capulet tomb, Paris mourns. He sends his servant away to wait for him nearby, and tells the boy to whistle if anyone approaches. While Paris strews the ground with flowers, the page whistles. Paris hides.

Romeo enters bearing a torch, with Balthasar following him. Romeo gives Balthasar a letter and instructs him to give it to his father (Montague) the next morning. He says he wants to see Juliet one last time, and to take a ring from her as a remembrance, and sends Balthasar away. But Balthasar doesn't leave, and instead hides nearby.

Paris recognizes Romeo and thinks he has come to desecrate Tybalt's or Juliet's grave, or both. He draws his sword and confronts Romeo. Romeo begs Paris not to try to stop him, but Paris refuses. They fight. Paris's page runs to call the Watch. Romeo kills Paris, but promises to grant Paris's dying request to be laid to rest near Juliet.

Though Paris is little more than a good-looking bore, his love for Juliet is real.

Romeo lies to Balthasar about his plans—once again he uses deceiving language as a way to gain privacy from the social world.

Paris throws flowers on his love's grave, while Romeo has come to kill himself—Romeo vs. Paris pits passionate love against a more "proper" love. It's no surprise who wins their duel.

Romeo tells the apothecary to break the law because the law doesn't do anything to help the apothecary out of his poverty. But Romeo is also unwittingly describing his own situation: the law cares nothing about his love, and so he's breaking it. By buying poison, Romeo throws off the last of the social bonds constraining him.

Romero opens the tomb and carries the body of Paris inside. He sees Juliet, and is amazed that her beauty is unaffected by death. He thinks it seems almost as if death has fallen in love with her. He kisses Juliet, drinks the poison, kisses her once more, and dies.

Friar Laurence arrives at the chuchyard and is greeted by Balthasar, who tells him that Romeo has returned to see Juliet. The Friar, sensing disaster, rushes to the tomb and sees the blood and weapons from Romeo's fight with Paris. Just as he enters the tomb, Juliet stirs and wakes. Friar Laurence hears the approaching Watch. He tells her what happened, and begs Juliet to flee with him. Juliet refuses. Friar Laurence runs.

Juliet sees the vial clutched in Romeo's dead hand and realizes he killed himself by poison. She kisses his lips, hoping to poison herself. But there is none left. She hears the Watch approaching, pulls Romeo's dagger from its sheath, stabs herself, and dies.

The Watchmen enter and see the dead bodies. They send men to rouse Prince Escalus, the Capulets, and the Montagues, and search the area. They find Balthasar and Friar Laurence.

Prince Escalus enters, followed first by the Capulets, and then by Montague, who says his wife has died of grief over Romeo's banishment. Friar Laurence explains to them everything that happened. Balthasar hands over the letter from Romeo to his father, which corroborates Friar Laurence's story. The Prince turns to the Montagues and Capulets and tells them that their hate is so terrible that "heaven finds means to kill your joys with love" (5.2.292). Montague and Capulet take each other's hands, promising to bury their grudge and to erect golden statues of Juliet and Romeo. Prince Escalus, mourning his own dead relatives, leads the group away.

Romeo fulfills both fate and love, and removes himself from the social world—he kills himself to be with Juliet. Note also that the dark tomb provides a kind of permanent night.

By fleeing, the Friar shows that his moderation, while usually the wiser course than passion, is often not as honorable, pure, or courageous as passion can be.

Juliet kills herself, fulfilling her fate, when she hears the approaching watch—a symbolic playing out of death as a form of privacy from encroaching society.

The social world discovers what has been going on in the private world.

Romeo and Juliet's love is so passionate that it has to be everything or nothing, and in a world of families, friendships, and civil law, love can't be everything. So their love demanded that they die. In other words, their love was their fate. And by killing themselves, Romeo and Juliet change the world in a way their words and lies couldn't:—they end the feud that made their love impossible. Fate may have ended their lives, but it also made their love powerful.