

ROMEO AND JULIET

THE SOURCES OF ROMEO AND JULIET

The story of Romeo and Juliet had been around for some time already when Shakespeare decided to set it as a play. The tale of the star-crossed lovers probably originated in Italian myth and folklore, finding its way to England via France. In England the story of Romeo and Giulietta, the Montecchi and Capelletti, appeared as a poem by Arthur Brooke, *Romeus and Juliet*, and also in a prose version by William Painter. It is probably from Brooke that Shakespeare took the bulk of the story. Brooke is not too sympathetic to the plight of the lovers. He does treat them with compassion but his aim is to moralize about the reckless nature of young love that flaunts the wisdom of their elders.



Shakespeare wrote almost no original plots. He used an English poetic retelling of an old Italian tale: Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*. Despite its Italian setting, the language, attitudes, and customs are generally English. In one respect, Shakespeare altered the story in a way which is shocking to modern audiences: he lowered Juliet's age from sixteen to just under fourteen. There are several reasons he might have done so. Boys played the female roles in Shakespeare's theatre, and they might have been more convincing as young girls than as more mature women (though audiences presumably found a boy playing Cleopatra or Lady Macbeth satisfactory). Shakespeare emphasizes the over-hastiness and premature nature of this love affair and probably felt he was underlining this theme at a time when marriage at fifteen was considered by no means shocking, though marriage at eighteen or twenty was in fact much more common. Shakespeare was notoriously inept at depicting children in his plays and he may not have had a really clear idea of what a fourteen-year-old girl would be like. Finally, the fact that the story is Italian may have fitted in with Northern European prejudices about hot-blooded early-maturing Southerners. However we imagine her, Juliet is given some of the most brilliant and memorable lines in the play, and is notable for her courage and wit.

Italian cities were infamous for their long-lasting, deadly feuds between prominent families. Elizabeth, like most absolute monarchs, abhorred duelling and feuding and tried to suppress it. Shakespeare's play is in part his contribution to her "just say no" campaign against such conflicts.

THE SETTING OF ROMEO AND JULIET

Shakespeare's play is set in Verona, Italy in about the 12th or 13th century when the Renaissance had already started in Europe - specifically in Italy where art and culture had begun to flourish early. It is in this post-medieval period of romance that Shakespeare locates the action. However, this was also a time of increased awareness of the tragedy of life, as you can see in Shakespeare's romantic tragedy of the 'star-crossed lovers'.

Italy at this time consisted of city-states, ruled by Princes and Dukes. Shakespeare chooses Verona, traditional birthplace of Juliet, some twenty miles south of Mantua, as the setting. The play takes place

in mid July. The playwright uses the heat of mid summer to heighten a constant sense of irritability. This increases the tension as the characters become inadvertently involved in the action.

Shakespeare also chooses an urban, wealthy and sophisticated setting because it allows him the opportunity to portray a wide spectrum of society - ranging from servants, the clergy and nobility of Verona, to the Prince as the ruler of the city-state.



A good part of the play takes place in opulent settings of wealth and luxury - the world of the privileged family of the Capulets. Think of the lavish buildings, costumes and entertainment that is part of the life of Romeo and Juliet. But we are also shown what life is like on the streets - where violence can break out unexpectedly and death is accepted as the price to pay for what is really just petty rivalry. This is the result of a long forgotten feud that has been carried on mindlessly - the probable cause jealousy and the drive for more power and wealth.

It is against this background of power and position that the love of Romeo and Juliet, pure and unspoilt, struggles to survive. We could say the lovers create a world for themselves, away from all that would destroy and dishonour their ideals, away from the corruption and rush of the society in which they live.

For an Elizabethan audience Italy would have represented a remote and exotic setting - a distance away from their colder climate and more restricted society. Yet when you read or see the play, it is really more 'English' than Italian. Much of this has to do with the language the playwright uses. Think of the puns that are so much a part of this play. They are an indication of the 'fashion' and language in use at the time in Elizabethan England. Characters also appear to be modelled on typical English 'types', especially the Nurse and certainly the servants. To prove the point, watch them in action as, less educated and even a little bumbling, they go about their business. Specific words indicate England rather than Verona: 'trenchers', 'joint stools', 'plate' (silverware) - and the dancers are told to "tickle the senseless rushes with their heels". A fire also lights the room - a little out of place in Verona in mid July! Later in the play we encounter the 'minstrels' (travelling musicians who have come to play at the wedding). Friar John cannot reach Romeo in time because of the 'pestilence', a reference to the Plague in contemporary London. Also, the apothecary's shop, filled with strange goods, reminds us we are in Elizabethan England rather than early Renaissance Italy.

Whatever the reason, Romeo and Juliet are very much a part of Western culture - today as much as when they first appeared on the stage somewhere between 1594 and 1596, more or less the same time that Shakespeare was writing the sonnets. So, in keeping with the themes we find in the sonnets, we can expect the play to be about the influence of time, love and death

The original poem also moves over a period of some months. Shakespeare chooses to contract time into no longer than five days (really four days and nights, to end on the morning of the fifth day).

So the action moves at quite a pace. We are moved by the heightened emotions experienced as we sympathize with the characters. Our understanding of the characters is far greater as we see them faced with situations to which there are no immediate or easy solutions. In the rush and pressure of circumstances, there is no time for thought or discussion. Everything is ruled by time. The result is a play dominated by driving and concentrated tension as we share the lovers' dilemmas.

The play is really what could be termed a 'separation-romance', not unlike the myth of Tristan and Isolde or even Troilus and Criseyde. Shakespeare would have been familiar with the latter poem by Chaucer and so there are similarities between the two. The idea of lovers held apart by fate, chance or circumstances has always fascinated readers and audiences, and in Romeo and Juliet Shakespeare exploits this theme to the full.

So, as happens today when a best seller novel or popular play is filmed, Shakespeare took what had come to England as a poem and transformed it into a play. In the process he exercised his own dramatic genius and flair for the theatre. On stage we watch the private lives of Romeo and Juliet, and the people who are important to them. Set against the intimacy of the scenes in which the lovers share their devotion are the public events that bring into play the conventions and demands of the society in which they find themselves. In this way Shakespeare is able to heighten the tension, making the play more exciting. In fact, a great deal of Romeo and Juliet is based on opposing forces - both individual and as part of the world into which the lovers are born.

THE CHARACTERS IN ROMEO AND JULIET

It is important that you are aware into which "houses" various characters fit.

CAPULET	neutral	MONTAGUE
Juliet Tybalt The Nurse Lord Capulet Lady Capulet Peter Sampson Gregory	Paris (kin to the Prince) Escalus, Prince of Verona Friar Laurence Friar John The Apothecary	Romeo Benvolio Mercutio (kin to the Prince) Lord Montague Lady Montague Abraham Balthasar

<http://www.virtourist.com/europe/verona/>

<http://www.tourism.verona.it/>

<http://www.learnthings.co.uk/default.asp>