CHARACTERS IN *ROMEO AND JULIET*

This document examines the characters in the play. It covers the following:

The Montague family
- Lord and Lady Montague
- Benvolio
- Mercutio

The Capulet family
- Lord and Lady Capulet
- Tybalt
- The Nurse

Others not directly related to the families
- Paris
- Prince Escalus
- Friar Lawrence

The Lovers
- Romeo
- Juliet

Part of our enjoyment of the play comes from an involvement with the characters who, during the course of the action, emerge as very real people. We watch with interest how they interact, their lives crossing at crucial moments. At the same time we see how people are expected to take on roles as part of their official duties — as members of the State and Church, or as parents, relatives, friends and servants.

At the same time however, Shakespeare also uses the characters as 'types', groups of people with whom an Elizabethan audience would have been familiar. These 'archetypes' allow us to make decisions very soon as to the sort of people they are. They play certain set roles in the action and mostly there is little character development. They are largely part of the dramatic pattern.

The playwright also uses the characters as part of the pattern of the play that looks at opposites. So, for instance, Benvolio is Romeo's cousin, essentially the peacemaker in the play. Juliet also has a cousin, the fiery Tybalt, whose intention it is to keep the feud going at any cost.

Another use of character in the play is to present various views and attitudes to love — ranging from the bawdy and outrageous to the intense and deeply felt emotions of the two lovers.

THE MONTAGUE FAMILY

Lord and Lady Montague

The Montague family appears early in the play. Although Lord Montague is as keen to fight as is his counterpart, Lord Capulet, there is also a seeming gentleness and caring about the parents. This is what Lady Montague has to say directly after the fight: "O where is Romeo? Saw you him today? / Right glad I am he was not at this fray' (Act 1, scene 1, lines 107-8), a remark that shows her care for her son. Zeffirelli makes much of their care for others in his film, showing Lady Montague attending to the wounded. In addition, they are both concerned about the welfare of their son, instructing Benvolio to help if possible.

They then largely move out of the immediate action (with the exception of Act 3, scene 1 in which they plead for the life of their son), until the end when we hear of the loss of Lady Montague, having died of a broken heart. Lord Montague is generous at the end, as he promises to erect a statue in 'pure gold' to Juliet — an offer immediately countered by Lord Capulet: "As rich shall Romeo's by his Lady lie …" (Act 5, scene 3, line 303).

Overall the family is supportive and closely allied. This in part allows Romeo the space to mature into a sensible and responsible husband as the play progresses.

We should remember, however, that the two families also represent an adult view of life, as opposed to the youthful, innocent and fresh outlook of the two lovers. Theirs is an adult vision, somewhat sullied by time and experience. Both families thus present obstacles to the smooth course of love anticipated by their children. The very feud in which they are involved creates a barrier between all the citizens of Verona — and this includes their own children.

Benvolio

Benvolio (derived from the Latin 'bene' meaning 'good') is Romeo's cousin and close companion. During the course of the play he also emerges as the peacemaker, someone whose word can be trusted. In retelling the events of the brawl that resulted in the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, the Prince calls on him for a true account — which he in turn gives, with possibly just a slight bias towards the validity of the actions of his friend, Romeo. With sincerity he ends with the words, "This is the truth, or let Benvolio die." (Act 3, scene 1, line 166)..

He has a light-hearted attitude to love, encouraging Romeo to view the other beauties of Verona instead of agonizing over his supposed love for Rosaline. Young and fancy free, Benvolio does not yet see love as a commitment. When Romeo speaks of his 'love' for Rosaline, Benvolio advises, "By giving liberty unto thine eyes, / Examine other beauties" (Act 1, scene 1, lines 217-8).

There is little development in the character. Basically he stays the same throughout the play: loyal and ready to keep the peace. We do however see him in private moments with Romeo, as well as in a more public capacity when he is called upon to bear witness. Ultimately Benvolio comes to represent a necessary balance in the play — as opposed to the fiery and single-minded troublemaker, Tybalt.

Mercutio

Although not of the house of Montague (he is in fact the Prince's kinsman), Mercutio sides with his friend Romeo. Mercutio is one of the 'helpers' in the play. As best friend and confidant to Romeo, he plays much the same role as does the Nurse in the Capulet family. He is supportive, defending the self-esteem of his friend when Tybalt chooses so rudely to insult Romeo, his as yet unrevealed, newly married kinsman.

We come to know Mercutio early on in the play. Just before the Montagues gatecrash the Capulet party, Mercutio delivers his 'Queen Mab' speech. This is obviously a set piece, often criticized for holding up the action. Yet it is undoubtedly a great moment for the playwright to show off his skill, writing an involved and almost mystical piece for the character. However, it does also show Mercutio as somewhat jaded and world-weary. This is how he answers Romeo at the end of the Queen Mab speech:

Romeo
Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!
Thou talk'st of nothing.
Mercutio
True, I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain …
(Act 1, scene 4, lines 97-100)

He is obviously a very intelligent, bright and quick-witted young man, but there is a basic pessimism about what he has to say — particularly about love. He appears cynical and suspicious of love. This is in contrast to the stubborn and perverse devotion Romeo shows for Rosaline early on in the play. However, his natural wit is mostly evident. We see a high-spirited young man, quick with words, ready to enjoy life and joke about love and commitment. Later in the play these characteristics are again evident as he jests with the Nurse, and also in his interaction with Tybalt before the fatal duel.

His death brings a moment of truth and misfortune to the play as we see yet another young life sacrificed for the archaic feud between the Montagues and Capulets. However his prophetic words, a reminder of the revenge theme, ring out for us to remember: "A plague a'both your houses!" It is as the result of his good friend and companion's death that Romeo at last challenges and kills the fiery Tybalt.

THE CAPULET FAMILY

Lord and Lady Capulet

In contrast to the Montagues, Shakespeare chooses to give more attention to the Capulets as parents. This is obviously a necessity in terms of the plot for Juliet must be threatened with disinheritance and expulsion from the family. However, it also highlights the process of maturation that Juliet must undergo in the course of a very short time, resulting in her setting aside the family in favour of her husband, Romeo.

When we meet Lady Capulet early on in the play, she appears to be a caring mother, intent on seeing her daughter securely and (hopefully) happily married to the Count Paris: "Tell me, daughter Juliet, / How stands your disposition to be married?" (Act 1, scene 3, lines 64-5). It would seem she herself was married at a young age, and became a mother very soon after. This has led to a somewhat jaded outlook on love and marriage, which she sees as something of a necessity in life. She is, however, not opposed to putting her own daughter in a very similar position, should Juliet agree to the arranged marriage to Paris: "Speak briefly, can you like of Paris' love?". Juliet's reply reflects the innocence of the character at this moment in the play: "I'll look to like, if looking liking move" (Act 1, scene 3, lines 97-9).

As the play continues, we are increasingly confronted by a hard and inflexible woman. Her plea for the death of Romeo is vehement and impassioned. Her subsequent withdrawal from her daughter, in spite of Juliet's heartfelt plea to her mother for help ("O sweet my mother cast me not away!") shows her determination to see the wedding take place, with no regard for the feelings of her only daughter.

There is little doubt that Lord Capulet loves his daughter. However, he is not prepared to tolerate what he sees as a headstrong attitude. He is a stubborn and authoritative man, not easily crossed, very aware of his social and financial position. His thoughtless, harsh words show his inflexibility:

Capulet
Hang thee, young baggage, disobedient wretch!
I tell thee what; get thee to church a'Thursday,
Or never look me in the face.
(Act 3, scene 5, lines 160-2)

He has already shown in the ball scene with Tybalt that he is not accustomed to being disobeyed, and he is certainly not prepared to accept Juliet's apparent wilfulness. His grief at the loss of his daughter at the end of the play is the price he has to pay for his misconstrued values, insensitivity and attempt to force his own will on his only daughter.

The Capulets, in contrast to the Montagues who seem contented in marriage, reveal another aspect of love. Here is an estranged marriage, in all probability arranged for economic reasons or to enhance

status and position — something about which the Capulets are very aware. There is a strong suggestion that Lord Capulet is tired of his wife. Paris remarks about Juliet, "Younger than she are happy mothers made", to which Capulet replies, "And too soon marred are those so early made" (Act 1, scene 2, lines 12-3) — surely a reference to his own wife. In the Zeffirelli film the director cuts to a shot of Lady Capulet at this moment to emphasis the point. Thus in contrast to the true love or Romeo and Juliet we see what marriage for convenience can produce!

Tybalt

Juliet's cousin and close friend Tybalt contrasts with Benvolio. Whereas the latter is cast as the peacemaker, the former comes across as defiant and antagonistic, a hot-headed and fiery character, totally devoted to the violence that keeps the feud alive — in fact, he embodies the very spirit of the feud. Here are his words at the ball, having been told by his uncle to keep the peace that night: "I will withdraw, but this intrusion shall, / Now seeming sweet, convert to bitterest gall" (Act 1, scene 5, lines 90-1).

There is no character development here: from the moment Tybalt appears to the time of his death, we are confronted by a young man whose life revolves around violence, fighting and action. There is a reckless bravado to Tybalt, a loyalty only to family and fighting. He prompts Romeo to violence, creating the circumstances that lead to Romeo's banishment — thus a man well deserving of the title, "Prince (later 'King') of Cats" (Act 2, scene 4, line 18 and Act 3, scene 1, line 70).

The Nurse

The Nurse is the counterpart of Mercutio as close friend and confidant to Juliet. She is a foster-mother to Juliet, having been her companion since the time of her birth. She is closest to the young woman, acting as the go-between in the developing relationship between the two young people.

The Nurse, together with the Friar, is the caregiver in the play. She understands Juliet's feelings and is attentive to her needs. She is motivated by her love for the young lady, going out of her way to accommodate her mistress's needs and desires. There is an earthy wisdom and common sense about this older woman. She is witty and in touch with youth. There is bawdiness about the way she deals with life and love. We laugh with her and admire the manner in which she deals with the fast developing love between her mistress and Romeo.

However, when Romeo is banished and Juliet faced with the prospect of marrying Paris, the more practical side of her nature emerges. Her advice to Juliet is to marry Paris. This comes from the heart and is the result of her own practical nature and experience of life. She values life above love. When questioned by Juliet as to her sincerity, "Speak'st thou from thy Heart?" her answer is immediate and sincere, "And from my Soul, / Too, else beshrew them both" (Act 3, scene 5, lines 227-8). Her role as caregiver and surrogate mother is completed. From this moment Juliet must rely on her own ingenuity and resourcefulness, without the comfort and guidance of the Nurse.

Although there is an excessiveness about her response to Juliet's untimely 'death', there is also an element of sincerity in what the Nurse has to say: "Alas, alas, help, help, my Lady's dead! / O wereaday, that ever I was borne …" (Act 4, scene 3, line 100-1).

Bawdy and devoted to Juliet the Nurse, in her role as servant and confidante, adds much to our enjoyment of the play.

Paris

Paris is the traditional suitor. He is necessary to the plot, as he is the one chosen as suitor for the hand of Juliet. In contrast to the passion, sincerity and impetuosity of Romeo, he courts Juliet in a formal and conventional manner. He speaks to her with dignity, self-respect and a certain nobility. Meeting with Juliet at Friar Lawrence's cell, he greets her formally: "Happily met, my lady and my wife!" (Act 4, scene 1, line 18).

Our respect for Paris as the 'betrothed' increases when we see him willing to give his life in order to maintain the dignity of the recently buried Juliet. These are his words as he arrives at the tomb, just before Romeo appears: "Sweet flower, with flowers thy bridal bed I strew - … / Nightly shall be to strew thy grave and weep." (Act 5, scene 3, lines 12/18). Here is the traditional lover: not unlike Romeo at the start of the play, in love with Rosaline, prepared to die for his mistress and passion — very much in keeping with the medieval concept of courtly love of which the Elizabethans would have been aware.

Prince Escalus

The Prince represents justice, the State and order. His is a public role and he speaks accordingly with the voice of authority and the law: "Rebellious subjects, enemies of peace … / Throw your mistempered weapons to the ground, / And hear the sentence of your moved prince." (Act 1, scene 1, lines 71, 79-80) . From the outset he refers to the plight of Verona and its citizens, caught in the feud between the two families. His desire is to end the quarrel, but he finds his authority ignored at every opportunity: essentially a man of action, he is rendered helpless by the age-old dispute. We admire his humanitarian attitude and integrity when faced with having to make a decision regarding the death of his kinsman, Mercutio, at the hand of Tybalt, and the subsequent killing of Tybalt by Romeo. His insight and wisdom, compassion and practicality are always evident — not least in the closing lines of the play, when order is finally restored, at the terrible price of the death of the only children of the two families. Appropriately, it is his words that close the play:

Prince
A glooming peace this morning with it brings,
The sun for sorrow will not show his head.
Go hence to have more talk of sad things;
Some shall be pardoned, and some punish'd:
For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.
(Act 5, scene 3, lines 305-310)

Friar Laurence

Friar Lawrence represents the Church. In this capacity, and not unlike the Prince, his greatest desire is to see an end to the feud. Yet not unlike the Prince, the Friar too is rendered powerless by the fury of the feud.

There is a basic wisdom about the Friar, evident from the first time we meet the character as he gathers plants and herbs. This is how he greets Romeo: "Or if not so, then here I hit it right, / Our Romeo hath not been in bed tonight." (Act 2, scene 3, lines 41-2). Here is a caring and compassionate man, intent on doing what is right for himself and those in his care in terms of the beliefs and values of the Church. It is because he sees hope for reconciliation and an end to the feud that he allows himself to become involved in the growing love between Romeo and Juliet — and this motivates him to perform the wedding ceremony that unites the two in the sight of the Church and God: "For by your leaves, you shall not stay alone / Till Holy Church incorporates two in one." (Act 2, scene 6, lines 36-7).

The Friar's chief concern is the good of the citizens of Verona and in the love of Romeo and Juliet he sees a means to end the conflict and bring peace to the city. He thus does all he can to facilitate the marriage and ensure that it succeeds. To this end he makes plans for Romeo to wait in Mantua until Juliet can join him and, when things do go wrong, helps Juliet to the best of his ability.

However, the Friar is also rendered powerless by Fate. Thus circumstances go wrong, in spite of his careful plans, ending in the deaths of both the 'star-crossed lovers'. That this does bring together the two families is, in part, the result of the care and concern of the Friar, but again we are reminded of the great price that all have to pay for peace to be restored.

The Friar is sensible and reasonable. He deals with people with respect and consideration. He puts his faith in God and believes in the power of the Church to heal and reconcile. However, he is also human. This is evident in the scene in the tomb when he fails to assist Juliet at the crucial moment when she most needs his support. There is a sense of terror and helplessness in his words to Juliet at this crucial moment:

Friar Lawrence
I hear some noise, lady. Come from that nest
Of death, contagion, and unnatural sleep.
A greater power than we can contradict
Hath thwarted our intents …
Come go, good Juliet. I dare no longer stay.
(Act 5, scene 3, lines 151-159)

We should however also remember that it is essential for Juliet to die that order may be restored — so the Friar must be temporarily removed, his strength marred by temporary caution. For purposes of character we could see his 'betrayal' as a flaw, although it is understandable that he should be fearful at this moment in the action.

On the whole, however, the character does elicit our sympathy and we admire the manner in which the Friar deals with life and those who rely on his support for comfort and direction. His honesty in retelling the events that took place in the tomb, and earlier in the play, re-establishes our belief in the basic goodness of the man. Notice the dignity and depth of feeling in his last words in the play:

Friar Lawrence
All this I know, and to the marriage
Her Nurse is privy; and if ought in this
Miscarried by my fault, let my old life
Be sacrificed, some hour before his time,
Unto the rigour of severest law.
(Act 5, scene 3, lines 265-9)

Romeo

We first meet Romeo as a lovesick young man, in love with the idea of love rather than romantically involved with Rosaline. Moody and impractical, self-indulgent and deluded, he appears very much as the traditional, medieval, romantic lover. This is how he speaks of love: "Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs, / Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes" (Act 1, scene 1, lines 181-2) However, during the course of the play, once he has met and fallen in love with Juliet, we see Romeo develop into a sensible and committed individual. Essentially it is his experience of true love that changes the character from an impulsive and emotionally excessive young man into a mature and confidant man of action.

We see Romeo, very much the young man of the city, in contact with his friends as playful and energetic, with a decided lust for life. In conversation with the Nurse and Friar Lawrence he is polite and well spoken. Romeo can also be level-headed and responsible. This is evident when he meets Tybalt. The latter is out for retribution, challenging the Montague who gate crashed the Capulet ball, paying far too much attention to Juliet. This is how Romeo responds: "I do protest I never injured thee, / But love thee better than thou canst devise …" (Act 3, scene 1, lines 61-2).

Repeatedly we note a dignity and respect in the way Romeo deals with others. In part this shows his nobility of birth but it also highlights his fundamental goodness.

It is of course the meeting with Juliet that changes Romeo's life. We watch as he develops and matures, increasingly taking responsibility for his actions. There remains an element of impetuosity in his actions, a tendency to self indulgent and excessive emotionalism. The scene with Friar Lawrence after the sentence of banishment sees Romeo, as Friar Lawrence so aptly observes, "With his own tears made drunk" (Act 3, scene 3, line 83). However, there is decided change as he increasingly takes control of his life and the forces that are intent on opposing his good intentions — the result of Fate that repeatedly intervenes in the lives of the young lovers, ultimately with tragic consequences for both families.

From the stereotype of the stock figure of the romantic lover, we see Romeo emerge as a credible and sympathetic young man, committed to his love and wife. On hearing the news of the 'death' of his wife he claims, "Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight. Let's see for means." (Act 5, scene 1, lines 34-5). He

appears a very convincing and rounded character whose development we watch with interest and sympathy. Romeo's death comes as a moving moment in the play. His intense, passionate words heighten the tragedy of a young life laid waste on account of a senseless feud, no longer relevant.

Romeo might not be the tragic hero Shakespeare was later to present in his mature tragedies (*Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear*) where we see a great man destroyed by the choices he makes as a result of a fatal flaw in his character. However, we are moved to pity by the plight of this young man who must challenge the inevitability of Fate. We are inclined to believe that no matter what decisions Romeo chooses to make, he is already cast in the role of "Fortune's fool" (Act 3, scene 1, line 127). Unable to escape, at the end he chooses death above life without Juliet — a clear indication that Romeo's love is deeply sincere and true.

Juliet

Juliet is introduced into the play as innocent and naïve, almost a child, not yet fourteen years of age. She is shown as open minded and willing to listen to the advice of her parents and nurse. There is a basic innocence about the character as she prepares for coming adulthood and the necessity to assume a place for herself as a member of the society. Confronted with the idea of marriage she says, "It is an honour that I dream not of" (Act 1, scene 3, line 67). The expectation is that she will mature, in time assuming the traditional role of wife and, eventually, mother.

All this is before her meeting with Romeo, an event that will change not only the course of her life but also result in a very quick, enforced maturity. Once she has inadvertently admitted her love for Romeo and committed her life to him, there is a new maturity in the way she responds to the people around her and the circumstances in which she finds herself. There is a passion about the way in which she replies to Romeo's advances, coupled with an energy and lust for life. She is prepared to take responsibility and, in fact, proposes marriage to Romeo: "If that thy bent of love be honourable, / Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow, / By one that I'll procure to come to thee, / Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite …" (Act 2, scene 2, lines 143-5).

Juliet is totally committed, prepared to accept the pledge of true love and the responsibility of marriage, and it is this that motivates her actions in the difficult circumstances that follow. Increasingly mature, once Romeo kills Tybalt she is forced to choose between her love for her husband and her responsibility to her family. She opts for love and her husband, staying true to him, even in the face of the threat of being cut off from her family. Here is her response to the Nurse who wishes shame on Romeo: "Blistered be thy tongue / for such a wish! He was not born to shame…" (Act 3, scene 2, lines 90-1).

Although her modesty remains, she is forced into pretence and trickery in order to remain true to her ideals and commitments. The scene in which she apparently agrees to her father's proposal that she

marry Paris shows great control and self-assurance: "Pardon, I beseech you! / Henceforth I am ever ruled by you" (Act 4, scene 2, lines 20-1).

Juliet displays remarkable courage and commitment when Friar Lawrence agrees to help her re-establish contact with her husband — even to the extent of taking the potion while accepting the reality of regaining consciousness in the Capulet tomb.

We cannot help but sympathize with Juliet, fellow victim with Romeo, of fate and circumstance. We feel compassion for her as she prepares for the inevitability of sharing death with Romeo, rather than enduring life with Paris: "Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger, / this is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die" (Act 5, scene 3, lines 169-70). The quickness with which she commits suicide shows again what might be interpreted as an irrational and headstrong nature. However, in terms of the play as a whole and the themes associated with love as a healing and redemptive influence, it is a necessary and inevitable end — and we cannot but sympathize with the character.

During the period of a few short days Juliet matures into a committed and reliable woman and wife, capable of taking decisions without the help of others. Her death, unavoidable and inevitable, is sad and tragic — the result of being outwitted and defeated by the vengeful influence of fate and circumstance.