

THEMES IN *ROMEO AND JULIET*

This document examines the main themes that appear in the play. It covers the following:

love (including care and nurture)

- love of material possessions and power
- love for one's family (familial)
- love for one's friends (fraternal)
- sexual love (bawdy)
- romantic love
- love as a healing influence

conflict

- public
- inner (private)

contrasting worlds

- real
- unreal

time (also Life and Death)

- the destroyer
- the healer

Destiny/Fate versus Coincidence/Chance

passion versus reason

LOVE

love of material possessions

Think of *Romeo and Juliet* and immediately you think of lovers. The play has come to represent all that young love exemplifies. It almost goes without saying then that the major theme of the play is love.

However, the theme is dealt with in far more depth than might first appear. Let's look at the various types of love Shakespeare explores in the play. This section deals with the love of material possessions and power

The story takes place in mostly affluent settings. The two families are of the upper class, both being Lords. So it is to be expected that there is a fair amount of wealth about. For example, the Capulet ball (and subsequent plans for the marriage) is an indication of wealth and the ability to entertain on a lavish scale. Thus Shakespeare creates an atmosphere of ease and opulence.

The Montague family features less prominently in the story, appearing mostly in the opening act, then reappearing to defend Romeo after the fight and finally again at the end when we also learn of Lady Montague's untimely death.

On the other hand, the Capulets are very involved in the action, not least because of the immediate marriage of their daughter to Paris. Shakespeare makes it clear that this is not a marriage of love but

rather one arranged for economic reasons. Paris is quite a catch for the family. He is a Count, not without status and presumably the wealth that goes with the title. When Juliet refuses to marry Paris it becomes increasingly obvious that what concerns her father is not so much his daughter's happiness as what the family stands to gain. Juliet becomes no more than another possession with which to barter.

At the end of the play Shakespeare makes the point that no amount of wealth and power, no statues erected in pure gold, can replace the lives that are lost. By pursuing wealth and status, the Capulets sacrifice the irreplaceable life of their only daughter.

familial love

Closely allied to the theme of love of material possessions is the love of parents for their children - and the manner in which, specifically, the two main characters respond to such care and control.

Early on in the play we see the concern of the Montague family for their son who, just recently, has been behaving in a rather strange manner, having fallen hopelessly in love with Rosaline. The caring way in which they speak to Benvolio about Romeo suggests that this is a family whose true concern for the happiness and well being of their son goes far beyond mere material concerns. Therefore in the end when Montague suggests erecting a statue to Juliet in pure gold there is the feeling that his intentions are true and virtuous. He wishes to honour the lady who his son loved so much that he would rather die with her than live without her. Further, Lady Montague has also died - of a broken heart, as Lord Capulet informs the prince: "... my wife is dead tonight; / Grief of her son's exile hath stopp'd her breath".

On the other hand, Lord Capulet's motivation to erect a similar statue to Romeo becomes questionable: "As rich shall Romeo by his lady lie ...". The next line does however tend to soften our criticism for he continues, "Poor sacrifice of our enmity". In part we judge him more harshly on account of the way in which he treated his daughter with regard to marriage, as discussed in 1.1 above. Throughout the play the Capulet family has been associated with control rather than allowing their daughter the freedom to explore and choose for herself. There is also the suggestion that the Capulet marriage was also arranged, and that Juliet's mother was bespoken to Lord Capulet in the same way she now wishes to see her daughter married.

In the early scenes of the play Juliet is obedient to her parents' wishes, prepared to go along with their suggestions. There is a naivety about her answer: "I'll look to like, if looking move. / But no more deep will I endart mine eye / Than your consent gives strength to make it fly".

However, once she has discovered true love, Juliet changes and matures. No longer is she the obedient and willing daughter. Instead she chooses to side with her husband, as opposed to her family - even in the face of losing Tybalt who she speaks of as 'the best friend I ever had'. Ultimately however it is, "My dearest cousin and my dearer lord". Juliet has grown up and is prepared to accept responsibility for her choices and decisions. From familial love Juliet has moved to romantic, but true, love.

We must assume that Romeo likewise takes leave of his family as his affection for Juliet grows. The play is suggesting that parental control must allow for the individual growth of young people. There is a readiness in both characters to leave their families and explore life together. Remember, early on in the play Lady Capulet encourages her daughter, "Well, think of marriage now: / Younger than you here in Verona, ladies of esteem, / Are made already mothers by my count. / I was your mother much upon these years / That you are now a maid." Apart from her obvious attempt to manipulate Juliet there is also the assumption that her daughter is 'ready' for marriage - assumedly physically and emotionally.

So *Romeo and Juliet* stresses the need for caring, understanding parents who will allow and encourage personal growth and maturation. Brooke, upon whose poem this play is based, was far more judgmental of the two young lovers. He sees them as rebellious to their parents' wishes, in his words, '... neglecting the authority and advice of parents and friends'. Again we are reminded that *Romeo and Juliet* is also about the age-old clash between youth and age.

fraternal love

Friendship (the 'buddy' theme) plays an important part in the story and is allied to the idea of loyalty. Shakespeare uses Benvolio and Mercutio as representative of the Montague 'gang'. We assume there are more young men involved, as specified in the stage directions: 'Enter Mercutio [and his Page], Benvolio and Men'. The Capulet faction is represented in the same way, but Shakespeare needs only concentrate on Tybalt as the leader.

The idea of close friendship is established early on when Benvolio takes it upon himself to counsel and help Romeo with regard to his love for Rosaline. It is Benvolio who suggests they go to the masked party where the main action of the play really starts. Throughout the play Benvolio retains the characteristics of loyalty and honesty. He serves as the peacemaker, supporting not only his friends but also the law.

The fiery Mercutio shows himself a concerned friend of Romeo before the ball and it is this close friendship that leads to the fight with Tybalt. Mercutio comes to the defence of his friend Romeo who, he assumes, is too cowardly to accept the Capulet's dare. Angry and offended, he takes up the challenge. In turn, Romeo must revenge the death of his friend, thus allowing for the very necessary complication to the plot. The close bond of friendship that he realizes existed amongst the young men sways even the Prince.

However, the theme of love for one's friends can be extended to include both the caregivers in the play, the Nurse and Friar Lawrence. Neither character is related to the couple, yet they play a vital role in advising and caring for both Romeo and Juliet - with disastrous results, as it turns out.

The Nurse comes into the play at the same time as Juliet's mother. We are immediately aware of the very close bond that exists between the Nurse and her young Lady, and this continues throughout the play. In the planning necessary to arrange the marriage, it is the Nurse who plays the go-between. Ironically, when she realizes that things have gone badly wrong, that Romeo is banished and marriage



to Paris is inevitable, she is the one who counsels Juliet to obey her parents. You might like to think about her motivation: is she sincere in her actions or is this just a manipulative way to encourage Juliet to marry the Count? Does this mean that her love and 'friendship' is possibly not as sincere as it appears up to this moment in the story?

The Friar is a good and loyal friend to both Romeo and Juliet. As a man of the Church he is motivated by the highest ideals: to bring together the Montagues and Capulets. In spite of this aim we also are aware of the care and warmth he feels for the young couple. He treats them with respect, problem-solving to the best of his ability and experience. However, his loyalty is tested when confronted by exposure in the tomb and he abandons Juliet at a time when she most needs his help.

Both Friar Lawrence and the Nurse, when their loyalty and friendship is truly tested, come short of our expectations. This could be seen as part of the theme that looks at youth versus age, and the different worlds from which characters come; one more conservative but caring, the other fiery, loyal and prepared to take chances. Shakespeare would seem to suggest that the friendship of peers is more reliable, if less insightful, than that of the caregivers.

Even the small role of Balthasar, Romeo's manservant, shows that friendship continues well beyond the bounds of what is expected of a servant. He remains loyal to Romeo even in the face of great personal danger.

sexual love

Shakespeare does not avoid the issue of sexuality. As it is a part of life, so it is an integral part of the story. Romeo and Juliet must consummate their marriage by spending a night together. It would have been so much easier simply to sleep together without the 'blessing' of marriage. However, Shakespeare makes it clear that the love of Romeo and Juliet is in a class of its own, way beyond the mere pursuit of physical fulfillment and sexual lust. This is a love that needs to be sanctified in the eyes of the Church and God if we are to believe in its intensity - a commitment that will end in suicide rather than a life lived apart.

In contrast to the innocence of sexuality that Romeo and Juliet show, the other characters treat sex as a joke, something about which to jest in an obscene and derogatory manner. In part this ties up with the theme of innocence and experience. Shakespeare is suggesting that love exists on many levels and that, with the passing of time, comes a familiarity that can lead to coarse joking and a blasé attitude.

Sex is also seen as something which has to be endured at a young age, as both the Nurse and Lady Capulet make clear. Sex is for having children: 'Women grow by men', says the Nurse. You might like to relate this to the theme discussed earlier that looks at love as a means to material gain and power. Mercutio, active and lively ('mercurial') but also experienced, blasé and cynical, jests about love in a bawdy, lewd and suggestive manner.

Remember that even Romeo admires Rosaline not so much for who she is, but rather as an object of desire - and that could include sexual lust. There is a dreamy romanticism about Romeo's attitude towards love in the early part of the play. This is before he experiences the unselfish love he comes to realize does exist. In the balcony scene (Act 2, scene ii) he claims almost ecstatically: 'My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee / The more I have, for both are infinite'. This is love that incorporates sexuality rather than exploiting it for personal pleasure or gain.

Sexuality is also presented as a threat. Juliet is betrothed to Paris without her willing consent. Juliet is already a married woman (even if it is without her parents' knowledge) yet she is faced with the prospect of having to assume the role of wife and mother to a man she does not love. Faced with this added complication it is understandable that Juliet chooses death above life.

The bawdy world of sex is very much a part of life on the streets and in the private conversations of the Capulets. Against this is placed the unsullied sexual awakening of the young and initially inexperienced Romeo and Juliet - a union sanctified by its innocence and intensity.

romantic love

We could define romantic love as being 'in love with the idea of love'. This suggests being in love with a notion or concept rather than with a person. It dates back to the medieval days when knights were expected to champion a lady, admiring her from afar rather than desiring physical contact. A more modern interpretation would see romantic love as unfulfilled sexual desire, devoid of any substance or actuality - an abstraction rather than a reality.

This romantic love is what we see when we first meet Romeo. He is madly in love with Rosaline - or with the idea of being in love with her. He admires her from afar. He sighs and keeps to himself, displaying all the symptoms of fanciful love or sublimated physical passion. Wisely, Benvolio suggests seeing Rosaline in the context of the other beauties of Verona.

However, once he has met Juliet this idyllic view of love changes. Now he is aware of the depth and passion that goes to make up true love. He is in love with Juliet, the person, rather than with an idea of what love should be. He confronts the reality of true love during the course of the play, maturing and gaining a new independence. By the end he is prepared to sacrifice his life rather than live in the void of being without Juliet.

In the same way Juliet makes an early commitment to Romeo. Have you noticed that it is in fact Juliet who proposes marriage in the balcony scene? Once she has pledged herself to Romeo this is the only

way to go, and she is adamant that as Friar Lawrence says, 'Holy Church incorporate two in one' (Act 11, scene vi). Here is the fusion of romantic and true love in a marriage that will withstand all the tribulations of time - even if Shakespeare does choose to telescope the events into only a few days. The act of sex is a natural outcome of their love, a fulfillment of their commitment to one another. In a sense, they become mature adults at this event. You might like to think of the idea here of being forever bound together in love and death, for that is how the play ends.

The other character struck by romantic love is Paris. He deals with Juliet and the impending marriage with the utmost formality and correctness, observing all the ceremony necessary for an engaged man. Look at his behaviour towards his betrothed in the brief scene in which they meet outside Friar Lawrence's cell, starting with the formal greeting, "Happily met, my lady and my wife" (Act IV, scene 1). The verbal interchange (more like sparring) that follows shows both the precision and ceremony with which Paris woos his lady as well as Juliet's new found independence.

Later in the play, faced with the untimely death of Juliet, Paris laments in a formal, stylized and far too 'romantic' manner: "Beguiled, divorced, wronged, spited, and slain! / Most detestable Death, by thee beguiled, / By cruel, cruel thee quite overthrown!" (Act 4, scene v). We need only compare this with Romeo's outpouring of true and unselfish grief in the scene in which he greets his 'dead' wife: "O my love, my wife, / Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, / Hath no power yet upon thy beauty" (Act 5, scene iii). This is not the formality of grief but the raw emotions of a man driven to suicide by the death of his beloved wife.

As with so much else in this play of contrasts, romantic love is placed in sharp opposition to the reality of true love - with all its happiness and tribulations. The lovers have a fair share of both, yet in the end it is their intense longing to be together, united in death, that consolidates the point Shakespeare wishes to make about the nature of true love.

healing love

Romeo and Juliet is a love story where very little goes right for the lovers. Their time shared is brief, their moments of true happiness even less.

Thematically, however, Shakespeare uses the true love of the two young people to make a point. Their dedication to one another, in spite of insurmountable obstacles, overcomes all the prejudice and fighting upon which the ancient feud is based. It is the example of unselfish love that finally brings about reconciliation - even if this comes at a terrible price! All the selfishness and grasping for wealth and power is resolved in the simplicity of the love Romeo and Juliet share. In fact, it could be said that the whole purpose of the play is only realized in the very closing lines of the play as we see the two families finally reconciled after so much strife.

Shakespeare believes in the healing influence of love, its ability as Chaucer noted, to 'conquer all'. Here, as in so many of his other plays, we see something positive emerge from human suffering and personal commitment. The sacrifice of the two young people is not in vain. The price is been heavy - but healing takes place!

CONFLICT**public conflict**

When the play opens we find ourselves in a world where gangs roam the streets in search of trouble from rival gangs. The scene is set for one of the major contrasts in the play: the public world of civil brawls as opposed to the personal and intimate world the lovers manage to create for themselves in the midst of all this upheaval and turmoil.

Wherever people meet in the streets of Verona there is the constant threat of conflict between the rival



houses. All are drawn into this strife, as we see in the opening scene. The fight is not only with the masters but also with their servants and those loyal to the families. In a sense this is part of the struggle for and the need to maintain power within the city-state, and both families vie for the number one position. Family honour is all - until the sudden realization that death has claimed both families' most precious and irreplaceable possession: their only child.

The tragedy of Romeo and Juliet is that this conflict will be directly

responsible in part for their tragic love affair. Unable to escape the confines of family hatred, both Romeo and Juliet are forced to withdraw into a world of their own - a world that will ultimately find its final fulfillment in death.

Of course, all this emphasis on public conflict makes for exciting theatre and Shakespeare use the action to create much dramatic tension. However, it is as a point of comparison that we should see public tension, for set against the public hatred is the personal perfection of the love of Romeo and Juliet.

inner conflict

Stress, as we living in the early part of the 21st century have been told so often, is part of everyday life. Yet Romeo and Juliet, set in more leisurely times in post medieval Verona, sees the main characters placed under an amazing amount of anxiety and tension - not least because they are forced to take such far-reaching decisions in a very short space of time. Small wonder they find themselves stressed!

Essentially, however, the tension and conflict faced by the characters can all be traced back to the public conflict that exists and flourishes as a result of the on-going and unresolved feud between the two families.

the lovers' conflicts

This is a play about decision making. Romeo and Juliet are constantly confronted by the need to make decisions that must influence their later lives. For example, they decide to marry very soon and arrange the wedding for the next day. From their love stems more inner conflict. For Romeo, there is the quick decision to fight Tybalt, in spite of the latter being his kinsman, then the decision to be made about accepting banishment, closely followed by the conflict of what to do when he hears of his wife's untimely 'death' and finally his resolve to die with Juliet in the tomb.

For Juliet the relationship and marriage brings no less inner tension. She is faced with an arranged marriage that is all but impossible for her to accept; she must see her husband leave on the very night of the consummation of their marriage; she finds all those she formerly trusted no longer her allies, leaving her alone to make decision; she faces all sorts of imagined possible horrors before taking the potion; and finally there is the decision whether to live without Romeo or die with him.

For both, over and above all these realities to be faced, is the conflict of loyalties that comes from belonging to rival families. To be confronted by all of the above would be a heavy burden for a mature, experienced adult to bear - yet Juliet is only in her early teens!

the parents' conflicts

The central issue around which the story is built - the family feud and the love of the two young people - also touches their parents and those nearest to them. We see the Montague parents' concern for the well being of their son early on in the play. Later we see the Capulets in action, as they try to convince their only daughter of a marriage well made. The seeming stubbornness and rebellious nature of youth is what they see. This brings a hardening of their attitude towards Juliet - with disastrous results.

the nurse's conflict

The Nurse finds herself in a similar state of conflict. With whom should she side: the family or Juliet, newly in love and very much in need of advice? In the end she resolves this conflict by siding with the family, leaving Juliet to take full responsibility for her actions. In this act of seeming treachery she inadvertently is also in part responsible for Juliet's death.

Friar Lawrence's conflict

Friar Lawrence is another of the caregivers who does all for the best, believing in the power of love to resolve the age-old feud. However, at the end the inner conflict that comes with the decision between what is right and what is wrong is too much to bear, and he also deserts Juliet. We see something of his remorse as he retells the story at the end of the play.

other characters' conflicts

The minor characters are also motivated by inner conflict brought about by the feud.

- Tybalt and Mercutio lose their lives moments after they make rash decisions about fighting in the streets of Verona.
- Paris is killed as he goes to mourn the death of his betrothed.
- Balthasar and Benvolio find themselves caught up in the constant public conflict, having to make decisions that question their loyalty.
- Lady Montague dies of a broken heart.
- Even the Prince cannot avoid the stress imposed upon him as decision-maker for Verona.

Shakespeare uses the inner stress of the characters to motivate their often rash, but understandable, actions. He also uses it to write some of the most beautiful love poetry ever penned in the English language.

CONTRASTING WORLDS

the real world

Romeo and Juliet are born into a world torn apart by hatred and feuding. From the very opening we are aware of the constant struggle for power. It is a harsh and unrelenting world in which they live. Violence can erupt on the streets - with fatal consequences. Except perhaps for the ball scene (and even there violence threatens!) there is very little evidence of the grace and humanity of Italy at the time of the Renaissance. Instead we see people pursuing their selfish interests, often in the guise of defending family honour.

It is also a very material world where the roles of master and servant are clearly defined. In this rich environment money and social position play an important part. Juliet is betrothed to Paris, not least because of his social standing (he is a Count) and the money that no doubt comes with the title. The Nurse is not above accepting the offer of what could be construed as a bribe. Romeo says, "Farewell; be trusty, and I'll quit thy pains" (Act 2, scene iii) and we do not hear her quibble.

Amidst all this strife the Prince tries hard to keep the peace, in as honest a manner as he can. His rulings are not heeded in this all but lawless society. Insults fly and challenges are made at the biting of a thumb!

Add to this the complications brought about by the telescoping of time into so few days and you have a social setting that is bursting with vitality, yet under the constant threat of unrestrained violence and death. It is, to say the least, a turbulent and unsettling world in which to live.

an unreal world

Against this hectic and strife-torn public setting the lovers create a world of their own, shut off from the harshness of reality. This is a romantic world of dreams-come-true, isolated from the rest of society and people.

This is what happens from the moment Romeo and Juliet meet at the ball. The rest of the partygoers seem to disappear as the lovers exchange their first, almost breathless words. Reality only intervenes again when they become aware of the fact that they belong to different houses.

The balcony scene is perhaps the best example of lovers set apart from the harshness of reality. Listen as they exchange pleasantries and exchange vows, all the time blissfully caught in the excitement of their mutual love (Act 2, scene 2). Yet again, however, the reality of the world around them intrudes as the Nurse calls for Juliet.

The wedding and then the bedroom scenes are again times of closeness, but the world at this stage is very much there: they cannot escape so easily into their own world any longer. Time (and fate) is not on their side. The threat of banishment is too real to ignore.

From this moment onwards the beauty of what the couple created is diminished as the real world of power, violence and death increasingly impinges.

It is only in death that Romeo and Juliet are united. However, from this personal world of love and commitment that they created, a new society emerges - free of the threats, fights and bloodshed they had known.

Shakespeare allows the audience, almost like a voyeur, to share the world into which Romeo and Juliet escape. Again, it is the beauty of the poetry that goes a long way to creating this world - and we are privileged to be able to listen as the lovers proclaim their undying love.

TIME**time the destroyer**

There never seems to be enough time to consider, to think, to argue in this play. Instead, time rushes on at an alarming pace, bringing more complications every day.

So time destroys. Long before the events of the play have started, the Montague and Capulet feud had begun. Time has not allowed that disagreement to be resolved. Instead, as time passed it seems the feuding took on a new desire for power and success, a new viciousness that came to involve the whole of Verona.

Even in the frenetic course of the few days that make up the action of the play, we see the death of several of the townspeople, including Romeo and Juliet. Time brings to the Capulet family a deep

sense of grief twice in the play. First they assume their daughter has died, only to realize a short while later that her death had been contrived and that she has, in fact, taken her own life. For the Montague family time and grief takes away both mother and son, also within a short period.

For the lovers time is their enemy. It allows brief moments of happiness but we are inclined to remember the bedroom parting with as much sorrow as we do the ecstasy of the balcony scene. There is viciousness about time, with its ability to cut short and destroy happiness.

Ultimately time takes away not only the youth of Romeo and Juliet but also destroys, or puts an end to, the budding love that there is hardly time to consummate. In Romeo and Juliet it is the swiftness of time that destroys - the incapacity to stand still and take note, to reflect on what is happening - that makes for such a tragic ending.

time the healer

For all that time destroys in this play, it is ultimately Time the Healer that we tend to remember.

Although time takes the lives of both the lovers and is responsible for the deaths of Mercutio, Tybalt and Paris, it ultimately leads to healing the long rift that has existed between the two families. The price is high: the deaths of the only son and daughter of Lords Montague and Capulet, but this does result in a new dispensation that brings together not only the families but also results in peace for Verona.



It is because of the constancy of the love of the two that the destructiveness of time is frustrated. As in the Sonnets, Shakespeare makes the point that true love (as opposed to the illusion of love or sexual attraction) can - and does - overcome the destruction of time. We never doubt the reality of the love that comes so quickly, nor the constancy of the lovers once they have pledged their love to one another.

What the play does is place every possible obstacle in the way of Romeo and Juliet to test the constancy of their love and commitment. Each dilemma must be faced without the necessary time to make reasoned decisions. Time is not on their side, yet they remain constant to one another - to the point of choosing to die together rather than live without one another. It may be feasible to say that we celebrate with the lovers in their decision to die rather than live, realizing that death is preferable to a life lived in loneliness.

So time destroys but it also heals, uniting Romeo and his Juliet in the eternity of death. There is a feeling that time has healed the stresses and strains put upon the two, allowing them the ultimate peace that only death can bring - a serenity so lacking in their breathless, hurried courtship and marriage.

The play ends on a note of reconciliation brought about in part by the ability of time to heal on a personal and public level.

DESTINY**destiny/fate versus coincidence/chance**

Romeo and Juliet is a romantic play. It looks back to the medieval days of courtly love, but brings an added element: the idea of true love that can exist beyond the confines of admiration and the courtly tradition, coming to fruition in marriage and a union of true minds and spirits.

In *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare relies on an established definition of tragedy; very generally, a play dealing with a serious theme, usually one in which a character falls to disaster, in *Romeo and Juliet* not because of personal failings but as a result of circumstances beyond the lovers' control. In the later, great tragedies Shakespeare moves the emphasis to incorporate a flaw in the character. Once chance has put the character in a threatening position, the element of choice comes into play.

So in this play, as established in the Prologue, the lovers are at the mercy of Fate or Destiny. In setting the story and main themes, the Prologue refers to, 'A pair of star-crossed lovers'. What the rest of the play then demonstrates is how Romeo and Juliet are defeated at every turn, unable to make events work to their advantage. This is evident early in the story when Romeo says, "But he that hath the steerage of my course direct my sail!" Later, after the death of Tybalt, there is another significant line as Romeo cries out in despair, "O, I am fortune's fool".

At the start of the play it would seem fortune is on the side of the lovers. They meet almost by chance, Romeo having read the invitation to the party, encouraged by Benvolio to attend. The subsequent meeting of the two also hinges on chance. It appears that fate brings the two together. Once the marriage is made, things go badly wrong. In a sense this is the playwright manipulating events in such a way that both Romeo and Juliet are unable to deal with circumstances. Fate has taken a hand and they seem destined not to be together. There seem to be powerful outside forces at work to keep the two apart - or at least not allow them the happiness they deserve.

We should remember that for an Elizabethan audience the belief in the influence of astrology and the stars on the lives of people was strong. Romeo and Juliet come together at an unfavourable time: the stars and destiny are against them. Also, there is the Wheel of Fortune that turns. Now it places people at the top, but in an equally short space of time its turn could bring a change in fortune. This is particularly true in *Romeo and Juliet* - certainly from the time of their marriage. After this things go badly wrong and they are unable to bring about the necessary changes that will ensure their future together. Romeo and Juliet become the victims of circumstance and fate that work together to ensure their downfall. Of course at the end of the play the lovers defeat the forces of fate, making their own destiny - even if that means sacrificing their lives in the process. How prophetic Friar Lawrence's words to Juliet seem in the light of this event: "A greater power than we can contradict / Hath thwarted our intents".

Ultimately the love of Romeo and Juliet is seen to defeat even the power of death. The radiance and fidelity of their love conquers all the obstacles that life and fate so cruelly place in their path. Shakespeare allows the audience to sympathize with the lovers by allowing us the foreknowledge that

the couple is fated and that death is the end when the Prologue declares that Romeo and Juliet will "... take their life". What makes the play more engaging, adding to the tension, is watching how events repeatedly frustrate the smooth course of true love. As in any tragedy, the end is determined before the events even begin. Part of the 'pleasure' for the audience is seeing how this will come about.

Yet in spite of all this we could still view the play from a more modern point of view, taking into account the element of choice. Romeo is far more aware of fate than Juliet. She makes many a decision of her own: she plans the marriage, she chooses to go along with Friar Lawrence's plan with the potion, she opts for death rather than life when confronted by her dead husband. Romeo also makes decisions. He chooses to fight Tybalt - even though it could be argued that he is so angry that there is really little real choice involved.

Certainly among the other characters there is choice. The Nurse chooses to assist her young lady. The Capulets have made a choice of husband for Juliet and will not listen to any alternatives. The Friar is a willing partner in the marriage of the couple. He chooses to betray Juliet when she most needs his help at the end. The Nurse too makes a choice, encouraging Juliet to forget her husband and marry Paris instead. Even the citizens of Verona choose sides, opting to be part of a long-forgotten feud, kept going only by their anger.

Finally it is fate, destiny or then chance that brings the lovers together. Once this has happened the power of their love conquers all obstacles. We share in their commitment and passion. We are appeased at the end of the play when peace is restored as the two families are reconciled. Death has buried their parents' strife.

PASSION versus REASON

If we consider passion as being a show of strong emotion, usually allied to outbursts of anger and/or sexual love, then Romeo and Juliet is a play in which passion far outstrips the restraints of reason.

The play opens with a burst of anger as the two rival families clash in the streets. Almost immediately we are faced by the irrational behaviour not only of the citizens of Verona but also the Lords Capulet and Montague. This is an event to be repeated later in the play, with disastrous results: the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt. We see tempers flare as characters lose sight of rationality, allowing their emotions to take over. It is only at the end of the play, with the coming together of the two families, that reason is restored.

Passion is foremost in the early scenes with the lovers. They make crucially important decisions that effect not only their lives also those of their families and friends. However, once it is established that their love goes beyond the boundaries of mere passion, that they their love is sincere and true, they rely more on reason than passion. Romeo is possibly more inclined to allow his emotions to take over (think of the scene in Friar Lawrence's cell after the fight as well as his hasty decision to join Juliet in

death). Yet there is a strong feeling that more reasoned decisions are made as the story takes its course.

Even the Church, in the person of Friar Lawrence, is inclined to passion - in spite of what appears as well reasoned decisions. Although the Friar's resolve to marry the couple makes sense, it is really against his better judgement. So too, his final need to flee rather than stay with Juliet at a time of great need can hardly be called an act of reason.

Romeo and Juliet is in part a romance and as such there is the expectation of passion, strong feelings, moving love scenes and outburst of uncontrolled emotions. However, it is reason that ultimately wins out at the end of the play. In the later plays (especially the tragedies *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *King Lear*), men who have completely lost the ability to respond objectively and rationally confront us. In *Romeo and Juliet* there is an element of reason that ultimately brings with it the healing influence of forgiveness - even at the terrible price of two young lives.

