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THE TRAGEDY OF

ROMEO AND JULIET

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the Kittredge Edition</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the Focus Edition</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Other Where: <em>Romeo and Juliet</em> as Ballet, as Musical by Barbara M. Fisher</td>
<td>xxxviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading <em>Romeo and Juliet</em> as Performance</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics for Discussion and Further Study</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmography</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Editors and Contributor</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This edition remains faithful to the Second Quarto except in instances of obvious error. If you have read the play before, you may find unfamiliar phrases like “an hour that I dreamed not of” instead of “an honor that I dreamed not of” in act 1, scene 3, line 50, or “direct my suit” instead of “direct my sail” in act 1, scene 4, line 100. Our explanatory notes clarify our decisions to select Second Quarto wording.

Also, spelling from Shakespeare’s time often indicates more clearly how a word should be pronounced when read aloud than do the modernizations in effect since the 1800s. We have therefore retained such original Q2 spellings as “ore” instead of “o’re” (over) and “nere” instead of “ne’er” (never) etc.—so that readers will avoid the pitfall of expanding the contractions by adding an extra syllable, which would violate Shakespeare’s rhythm.
Introduction to the Focus Edition

Tragedy, Language, Performance Structure

Romeo and Juliet as Tragedy

Audiences have for centuries valued the story of “Juliet and her Romeo” ever since Shakespeare appropriated it from the poet Arthur Brooke to write a tragedy for the stage. Most readers of Romeo and Juliet come to the play with certain assumptions about it. Some have seen stage or film productions, but even those who have never experienced any kind of performance have heard the play’s lines quoted. What is not generally appreciated is that Shakespeare traversed light years as a playwright in the short period between his first tragedy, Titus Andronicus (ca. 1592), and his second, Romeo and Juliet (ca. 1595). Part of the play’s appeal for contemporary audiences derives from the fact that the great joys of this love story play out alongside Shakespeare’s depiction of trauma, pain, and the civic illnesses of vendetta, violence, destruction, and death.

While Brooke moralized about rebellious youth who defy their elders and bring about their own undoing, Shakespeare transformed his source, achieving something unprecedented for the stage of his time: creating a tragedy out of story of requited love and marriage. Love stories on the early modern stage were associated not with the evolving genre of tragedy but primarily with plots derived from Roman New Comedies. In such plays, some older character who is ridiculed forbids the lovers to unite. Conflicts in the New Comic recipe—the menace threatening the lovers—give rise to clowning and foolery, assuring audiences along the way that the threats will come to naught and all will end happily. Shakespeare augments both the sense of impending danger and the foolery, experimenting with his play to create suspense and hide what he is up to.

One of the richest facets of Romeo and Juliet is its humor. The play unfolds with a manic playfulness, a verbal relish and an unabashed bawdy that thrives especially on the ridicule of Petrarchan love-longing, love-at-first-sight, and lust. Among modern artists trying to capture the flavor of Shakespeare’s originality are the filmmakers of Shakespeare in Love, who suggest that Shakespeare the apprentice writer wasn’t sure whether he was writing a comedy or a tragedy, and Baz Luhrmann, who in his film version tries to reproduce some of Shakespeare’s shock value by opening what is now a “classic” tragedy with an unexpectedly ludicrous action sequence.
Without being macabre, the play is also death-filled: Capulet alludes in 1.2 to his dead children; Juliet alone remains of them all. The Nurse in her anecdote in 1.3 mentions her dead daughter Susan, who was too good for the Nurse but who made it possible for her to suckle Juliet. She also praises her dead husband, whose joke about falling backward (into a sexual posture) Juliet seems to have understood even as a child. The plague that is a cause of the friar’s aborted message to Romeo is late reminder of the mortality that hangs over the action as tenaciously as the clowning and wordplay.

Yet another highly original aspect of the play is that Romeo and Juliet and most of its other characters were not the noble personages audiences expected to see on stage in a tragedy. Here, too, Shakespeare was adding something new, something he did not attempt again until the late tragedy *Othello*, and in that play, because the hero is a general for the nobles of Venice, he comes closer to being of noble or exalted stature than do Romeo or Juliet, who are born to families of wealth but not nobility.

Though there is no evidence that Shakespeare was familiar with Aristotle’s ideas about tragedy, he seems intuitively to have used the one principle Aristotle mentions as critical for success in tragic design: action that is driven or, in modern terms, “motivated,” by human agency, intertwining character and tragic outcomes. The types of drama familiar to Shakespeare and his audiences were the morality and the mystery play, genres very different from classical tragedy. With a Christian God presiding over the universe of these plays, they worked within a framework of redemption, whether or not explicitly depicted. Earthly defeats in such dramas often result in victories in the afterlife—or could at least redeem souls or countries from endless suffering.

But Shakespeare’s tragedies, like those of antiquity, do not avoid showing us extremes of human suffering and raise the enduring question: Why do horrible things happen to people? To this question, however, the plays refuse to give any satisfying answers. David Scott Kastan argues that tragedy “for Shakespeare, is the genre of uncompensated suffering, and as he writes in that mode, the successive plays reveal an ever more profound formal acknowledgment of their desolating, controlling logic” (Kastan 9). If Hamlet (Shakespeare’s most developed tragic character) ponders the value of existence, seeking some compensation for life’s assaults on his single consciousness, Romeo and Juliet in Act 5 answer Hamlet’s question “to be or not to be?” with unhesitating and uncompromising resolve: “to be together or die” is both question and answer. The play’s genius is to make us share the lovers’ conviction that to be together, whether in life or death, is the only redemption possible for them. In two soliloquies in the last scene, the first spoken by Romeo, the second by Juliet, both address the lost beloved in a final moment of earthly togetherness. Bodies strewn around the stage, those incontrovertible, material emblems of loss, are the Shakespearean norm, and it is one to which this early tragedy conforms as well. While his tragedies sometimes show glimmers of redemption in their closing moments, this one confronts us with the spectacle of youthful generations laid waste. The “pure love” Friar Lawrence has, in his inept way, sought to bring to Verona’s warring families is an ironic victory in view of the death of its youth—not only Romeo and Juliet but also Paris, Tybalt, and Mercutio.
THE TRAGEDY OF
ROME AND JULIET

[PERSONS IN THE PLAY †

Citizens of Verona
Montague Connection
  Romeo, a Montague
  Romeo’s father
  Romeo’s mother
  Benvolio, Romeo’s cousin
  Mercutio, Romeo’s friend, related to the Prince
  Abram, household servant
  Balthazar, Romeo’s servant
Capulet Connection
  Juliet, a Capulet
  Juliet’s father, called Father, Capulet, and Old Capulet
  Juliet’s mother, called wife, Capulet’s wife, mother, and Lady (i.e., lady of the house)
  Paris, a count (county), related to the Prince, and Juliet’s would-be husband
  Tybalt, Juliet’s cousin
  Nurse

  Peter, a servant of the Nurse
  Sampson, household servant
  Gregory, household servant
  Unnamed servant, Clown
  (perhaps Sampson or Peter)
  Old man, Old Capulet’s cousin
  Three Musicians
  Servants at the Capulet party
  Guests at the Capulet party

Others of Verona
  Escalus, Prince of Verona
  Romeo’s unnamed friends
  Tybalt’s unnamed friends
  Citizens
  Friar Lawrence
  Friar John
  Officer, Watchmen, Chief Watchman

Citizen of Mantua
  Apothecary

Scene.—Verona; Mantua.]

† Since theatrical companies in the 16th and 17th century were limited to about 15 men and boys, a full complement of persons in the play in stage directions and dialogue required doubling and tripling of roles. In Garrick’s eighteenth-century promptbook, for example, Benvolio and Friar Lawrence were played by the same actor.
The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet

The Prologue†

Chorus 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-crossed lovers take their life,
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents’ strife.
The fearful passage of their death-marked love,
And the continuance of their parents’ rage,
Which, but their children’s end, naught 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.

† The Prologue is sometimes omitted in performance, and indeed its position in the early quartos, placed before the play’s subtitle, suggests that it may have been written only for readers. When it is included in a performance, an actor playing the Chorus will speak the lines, as in the illustration on page 3. If an actor dressed as the prince speaks the lines, he gives them moral authority. If an actor dressed as the friar speaks the lines, then the friar is exonerating himself beforehand: it is fate that will cause the tragedy, not his faulty actions and inactions. Franco Zeffirelli treats the Prologue as a voiceover, equivalent to the reliable, omniscient narrator in fiction. Baz Luhrmann casts the Prologue as a television anchor reporting breaking news, rather than an omniscient narrator. Nevertheless, this speaker is an authoritative figure who comments about the violence in a decadent Verona Beach overrun by thrill-seeking street-gangs and Mafia dons.

‡ Prologue: A much-quoted phrase, suggesting the length of an ideal Shakespearean performance. At 3186 lines in the First Folio, published in 1623, a performance of Romeo and Juliet without cuts should take about three hours. Probably only the First Quarto, published in 1597, could have been performed, complete, in only two hours. However, Shenandoah Shakespeare (of The American Shakespeare Center, based in Staunton, Virginia) achieves the two-hour goal even with a longer text by adhering to original practices (no scenery or scene changes, minimal costume changes) and by rapid yet clear speech.
**Reading *Romeo and Juliet* as Performance**

The first step in reading the play as performance is to try to imagine the words as being spoken to other characters on Shakespeare’s platform stage (described above, pp. xvii-xix). Since Shakespeare was part of the company that performed his plays, it seems likely that he would have been on hand for actors’ questions. Perhaps that is why his stage directions don’t give readers very much help: he didn’t bother to write out many stage directions. Or perhaps, as most scholars believe, he had nothing to do with the publication of most if not all of his plays and is not responsible for the printed stage directions or their absence. What can also be confusing for readers is that the author begins his scenes dramatically—*in medias res*, that is, in the middle of things—and then fills in the story gradually. As readers we may remain blissfully unaware that one setting has morphed into another, that in performance on the platform stage one part of the stage could represent action outside of the Capulet walls and the next scene within the walls. As students of Shakespeare’s artistry, however, we will want to be alert to his sleights-of-hand, his magician-like ability to manipulate the setting at will on his platform stage.

Not only were Shakespeare’s theaters devoid of stage sets that might give audiences a clue about a specific scene, but Shakespeare hides much of his information about his characters’ actions within the words that they speak, and readers who want to visualize performance choices have to look actively for that information. Whatever stage directions the original texts *do* give us are in italics. The stage directions that we have added—both in brackets and in roman rather than in italics—offer our interpretations of action that is implied by the play’s words. Each scene starts with entry information, and the scene’s first explanatory note will mention which of the actors’ words imply a certain location and situation. For example, our first note for 3.1 draws upon Benvolio’s words in the second line for its information about location: “The day is hot, the Capels abroad” tells us that Benvolio and Mercutio are somewhere on the streets in Verona, and that it is afternoon, the hottest time of day in Italy.

*Romeo and Juliet* is a play that is all about conflict, and each conflict sends the action in a new direction. Reading the text as performance also means trying to imagine where a given scene is going and what might prevent it from getting
there. In other words, what is the scene’s basic “mission” or storyline? For example, in 2.3, Romeo’s goal is to get Friar Lawrence to marry him to Juliet, and by the end of the scene, he has persuaded the friar to do so. However, the scene does not open with Romeo’s request, but with the simple stage direction “Enter Friar [Lawrence] alone, with a basket.” The friar’s first words about the morning and about gathering “baleful weeds and precious-juiced flowers” (8) imply that the stage space is somewhere outside his monastic cell, perhaps in the countryside. The friar then shares his thoughts at length with us, reflecting upon nature’s power to do good or ill. An imaginative reader will think about where the friar moves once he has entered from an upstage entry door, about what other props he may be carrying (a trowel for digging perhaps) or the costume he might be wearing, about whether or not he comes close to audience members to share his thoughts with them about what lies within the “infant rind of this weak flower” (23), and so on.

As readers get caught up in the friar’s soliloquy, they might forget the scene’s probable direction in the story as a whole. But this distraction is part of Shakespeare’s normal dramatic strategy, which creates suspense by both raising and frustrating our expectations. Instead of starting out, as we might expect, with Romeo’s haste, the scene starts out slowly, meditatively. So absorbed is the friar in his thoughts that he doesn’t see Romeo approach, which the text marks some ten lines before Lawrence’s speech ends.1 By reading the lines carefully, we become aware that Lawrence doesn’t see Romeo at first. After Romeo says “Good morrow, father” (31), the friar says, “Benedicite. / What early tongue so sweet saluteth me?” (32-3). No stage direction informs us that the friar’s back is to the entering Romeo, or that he’s not sure whose voice he has just heard, or that he is nearsighted. The line itself tells us only that he is startled when he does see Romeo, for that’s why he swears (Benedicite—by Saint Benedict), something we might not expect from a holy man except when he is caught off guard. The worst directors (and readers) fail to pay attention to the choices for action offered to them by the dialogue; the best use the hints built into the language as opportunities for originality that clarify the action.

Shakespeare reminds us of the conflicts embedded in the scene as he goes along. We know about Romeo’s mission, but the friar’s questioning reminds us that Romeo will also have to explain his mission, starting with why he hasn’t slept that night. We learn that Romeo has often confessed his frustrated love for Rosaline to the friar (and we have already learned in the first scene that Romeo has not confided in his parents). The dialogue does not let us forget this prior love even if she never appears, and as readers we may want to think about why the name Rosaline is so often spoken. In introducing the new, thoughtful character of the friar in this scene, Shakespeare seems to be playing up his temperament in opposition to Romeo’s. His words here suggests a character who, at least in this scene, is cheerful (“The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night” [1]); hard-working (“I must up-fill this osier cage of

1 However, this entrance might have been placed in the playtext by the bookkeeper rather than by Shakespeare, to warn the actor to get ready to enter.
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~ Dr. James Wells

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