

Romeo and Juliet



ROMEO AND JULIET is the first of Shakespeare's great tragedies and the loveliest. It is golden with the light of morning and heavy with the death of all bright things, and the names of Romeo and Juliet have passed into the language as a symbol of youth and love.

The story opens in the Italian city of Verona, which has been troubled by an ancient feud between two noble families, the house of Capulet and the house of Montague. Three times there has been fighting in the streets, and the play opens with a fourth. Two of Lord Capulet's servants deliberately start a quarrel in the public square, and the brawl explodes into a street fight. The two old lords rush for their swords, and it is not until the prince of Verona enters that peace is restored. The prince is weary of the senseless and bloody feud and he decrees that anyone who fights in the streets of the city from that time forward will be condemned to death.

The young heir of the Montagues, whose name is Romeo, has taken no part in the affair. He has been wandering since day-

break in a grove of sycamore trees west of the city. His mother and father are worried about him, since it is not like Romeo to be so sad, and they ask his cousin Benvolio to find out what the trouble is. Benvolio discovers that Romeo is in love with a fair lady named Rosaline who refuses to return his affection. He has been behaving like any proper young Italian lover, spending his days in sighing and his nights in sleepless woe, and it is his cousin's opinion that Romeo ought to go out and look at other young women instead.

The scene shifts to Lord Capulet. He has decided that he is willing to accept the decree of the prince of Verona, for he is an old man and tired of quarreling. With him is a young kinsman of the prince whose name is Paris, and Paris hopes to marry Capulet's beautiful young daughter, Juliet. Her father is reluctant to have her betrothed to anyone, since she is only fourteen, but he is fond of Paris and tells him to approach Juliet during the feast that will be given at the Capulet house that evening. "Woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart."

Lord Capulet has a list of the guests, and he gives it to his servant with instructions to go about the city and invite them all. The servant cannot read and is looking for some "learned" man to explain the list to him when he encounters Romeo. Romeo discovers that his dear Rosaline has been invited, and Benvolio challenges him to attend the feast and compare her with the other fair ladies of Verona.

Late that afternoon, Lady Capulet learns that Paris has asked for her daughter's hand in marriage. She wants to know if Juliet favors the match, and sends for the nurse to fetch her.

Juliet's nurse is one of Shakespeare's great comic creations—an earthy, practical, well-meaning old peasant woman with a vast interest in weddings and a special delight in handsome young men. The Nurse is a great talker and all her talk is wonderful. Just at the moment her mind is running on the question of Juliet's exact age, and she launches on a long discussion of what Juliet did when she was three years old. It takes some time to haul her away from her reminiscences and back to the present, but the gabby old lady is finally persuaded to stop talking. Lady

Capulet asks her daughter about young Paris, and Juliet agrees to look with favor upon him.

By this time the guests are arriving, and some uninvited guests are arriving also. All the guests are masked as they come by torchlight, but two of them have a special reason to be in disguise, for they are Romeo and Benvolio of the enemy house of Montague. With them is a delightful friend of theirs, a kinsman of the prince named Mercutio.

Mercutio, like the Nurse, is one of the world's great talkers. But while he is just as funny as the Nurse he is a gentleman of wit and breeding, and his humor, unlike hers, is intentional. Just at the moment he is highly amused by Romeo, who is in such a state of melancholy that he has decided not to do any dancing, and Mercutio hopes to extricate his friend from the mire of love in which he seems to be sticking "up to the ears."

Romeo is troubled by a sense of foreboding and a warning dream, and this sets Mercutio off on a lively discussion of dreams. In his view they are all caused by a fairy named Queen Mab. She races over people's noses as they lie asleep, in her chariot that is made of half a hazelnut and steered by a "small grey-coated gnat."

And in this state she gallops night by night
Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love . . .

Mercutio is fascinated by this delightful idea and goes on embroidering it with such enthusiasm that his friends have to beg him to stop. For they are already too late for supper at the Capulet house, and the dancing is about to begin.

Within the house the servants are clearing away the tables, and Lord Capulet comes forward to greet his guests. He is a happy man as he bustles about, instructing the musicians and rounding up the ladies for the dance. His own dancing days are over, but he enjoys standing by with an old friend and talking of the days when they were both young.

Romeo, looking for Rosaline, sees Juliet among the dancers, and his heart falls at her feet. She is so beautiful that she makes even the torches seem dim, and he can think of Rosaline no longer

now that he has seen Juliet. He tries to find her name from a passing servingman and does not succeed, but he is resolved that as soon as the dance is over he will go and speak to her.

Romeo's question to the servant is overheard by a fierce young Capulet named Tybalt. It was Tybalt who brought such violence to the street fight, for he hates the members of the house of Montague as he hates hell. He sends at once for his rapier, enraged that an enemy should have come to the feast, but his uncle stops him. Old Lord Capulet is not going to have the evening spoiled, and he holds Tybalt down with one hand, as it were, while he cheers on his guests with the other.

The dance ends, and Romeo is able to make his way to the place where Juliet is standing. He is in the disguise of a pilgrim—a pilgrim from the Holy Land—and he speaks to her as a pilgrim might who has found the shrine of his saint. But what he really wants is a kiss, and after a charming, half-teasing dialogue, Juliet lets him have his way. Then she is called by her mother and leaves him, and Romeo, questioning the Nurse, discovers that he has fallen in love with the daughter of his father's foe.

The dancing is over and the guests prepare to leave. Juliet, standing by the door to watch them go, pretends to the Nurse that she is interested in several of the young men. But the only one she is really watching is the young man who kissed her, and when the Nurse finds out his name Juliet discovers in her turn that she has fallen in love with an enemy.

Romeo leaves the house of the Capulets but his heart has stayed behind. He reaches the lane that runs by their orchard wall and realizes that he cannot bear to go any farther away from Juliet. He climbs over the wall and leaps into the orchard, and his two friends make a brief, laughing search for him before they go home to bed.

Juliet has been unable to sleep and she comes out of her bedroom to stand on the balcony overlooking the orchard. Romeo, looking up from among the trees, sees her by the window, and for him it is as though the morning had dawned and the sun had risen in the east. "It is my lady; O, it is my love!"

What follows as she leans over the balcony is perhaps the most

famous love scene in all literature. Romeo and Juliet speak to each other in the language that all lovers would use if they could, and their lovely words are touched with the magic of the night and the silver of the moon. The hatred that two families bear each other means nothing to them, except as it makes Juliet fear for Romeo's safety. Nothing is quite real to them, in fact, except their love for each other, and their voices reach out in breathless delight, their hearts touching if their hands cannot.

Before they are finally forced to part, they succeed in making one practical arrangement. Romeo promises to find someone who is willing to perform a secret marriage ceremony, and Juliet agrees to send a messenger to him at nine o'clock in the morning to find out what arrangements have been made. They are too young and too much in love to think of even a day's delay in the wedding.

Romeo goes to the cell of an old priest, Friar Laurence, who has been out in the early dawn to gather herbs. The friar is his friend and confessor, and for a moment he is startled by Romeo's change of heart. But it is clear that this time he is in earnest, and the friar agrees to the secret marriage. For it may be that when the children of the two warring houses are united the parents will forget their hatreds and live in peace.

Benvolio and Mercutio are wandering about the streets that morning, still wondering where Romeo has vanished. They had called at his father's house earlier in the day, but all they found was a letter waiting for Romeo from Tybalt, challenging him to a duel. Mercutio has never liked the arrogant Tybalt and is enlarging enthusiastically on all his failings when Romeo enters and gets Mercutio's cheerful eloquence transferred to him instead. Mercutio enjoys teasing his friend and is delighted to find he has recovered his good spirits and is prepared to tease him back. "Is not this better now than groaning for love? now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo."

Lacking a love-lorn Romeo, Mercutio looks around for other game and lights on the Nurse. She has just come into view, voluminous in her skirts, and Mercutio is quite unable to resist teasing her. After he has departed, singing a final impudent

song in her honor, Romeo tries to calm the insulted old lady by explaining that Mercutio "loves to hear himself talk." But the Nurse is not appeased. "Afore God, I am so vexed that every part about me quivers." However, she has many things to talk of, including her opinion of Paris and how sweet Juliet was when she was a baby, and Romeo with difficulty manages to penetrate her rambling good will and give her a message for Juliet. The marriage will be performed that afternoon by Friar Laurence in his cell.

Juliet had sent the Nurse at nine in the morning, and ever since then she has been waiting for her to return. When the old lady finally reappears she is in a most unsatisfactory state of mind, determined to tell her charge all about how her bones ache. Juliet has no real interest in her Nurse's bones at the moment. What she wants is news and what the old lady wants is sympathy, and the scene between them is both funny and charming in its naturalness.

Romeo and Juliet are married that afternoon by Friar Laurence in his cell. The friar is doubtful of the wisdom of so much haste, but Romeo is afraid of nothing, not even death, so long as he and Juliet are united.

It is hot that afternoon while Mercutio and Benvolio are walking about the public square of Verona. Benvolio, a good, temperate soul, is anxious to keep the peace and he tries to persuade Mercutio to go indoors. For hot weather breeds quarrels and he is anxious to avoid any trouble with the Capulets. Mercutio is amused by his pacifistic friend and supplies him with a long and completely unjust account of his warlike ways, to pay him back for suggesting that Mercutio would permit himself to get into an argument.

Benvolio's anxiety is justified; for Tybalt appears, restlessly hunting Romeo to challenge him to a duel. Tybalt has no quarrel with Mercutio, who does not belong to the hated house of Montague, and he brushes him aside as Romeo enters. It is Romeo he has come to seek, and he is determined to kill him.

But Romeo is equally determined, for his part, to be friends with Tybalt, who is Juliet's first cousin and therefore sacred in

her lover's eyes. When Tybalt taunts him, Romeo refuses to draw his sword, and Mercutio is outraged that Romeo should refuse to answer such insults. If Tybalt wants a duel, Mercutio is quite prepared to give him one.

Romeo tries to separate the two combatants and his efforts lead to disaster. Tybalt's sword slides in past Romeo's arm, and Mercutio is given a fatal wound. He falls, and the agonized Romeo finds it impossible to believe what has happened. "The hurt cannot be much." The dying Mercutio agrees that it might be worse. "'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve.'" And so he meets his death, with a casual gallantry that even lets him make a final pun.

Romeo is driven wild by the thought that Mercutio died for him, and when Tybalt returns he instantly challenges Juliet's cousin to the duel he refused before. Their swords clash, and Tybalt falls dead.

Romeo stands motionless, staring at what he has done. For he has not only killed Juliet's kinsman but has doomed himself to death by the prince's decree. Benvolio hurries him away and then does his best to explain to the prince how the tragedy occurred. But the most Benvolio can achieve is to persuade the prince to change the death sentence to banishment. Romeo must leave Verona by daybreak and never return to the city again.

Juliet is waiting eagerly for night to fall so that her husband can come to her. Instead it is the Nurse who comes, mourning Tybalt's death. At first the horrified Juliet can think of nothing but her murdered cousin, and then she thinks of Romeo instead and forgets everything else in her longing to see him. The Nurse promises to go to Romeo and finds him hiding in the friar's cell, torturing himself with the thought of his banishment and the conviction that Juliet must hate him as a murderer. The Nurse brings him word from his wife, and Romeo learns that at least they will have one night together before he leaves the city.

The night passes, and a bird sings in the orchard below Juliet's window. It is time for Romeo to leave, but Juliet cannot bear to let him go. She is sure it must be the nightingale they

heard singing, down in the pomegranate tree, but Romeo knows otherwise.

It was the lark, the herald of the morn,
No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east:
Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops;
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

But still Juliet cannot bring herself to let him go. It was difficult enough to part the night they met, and that was only for a little while. Now it may be forever, although Romeo does his best to comfort her with talk of a happy future.

Desperate with the parting, Juliet turns to encounter her mother. Lady Capulet has entered the room with what she feels is very good news, for Lord Capulet has arranged everything with young Paris and he will marry Juliet the following Thursday.

Juliet has always been a good and obedient daughter, and both her parents are shocked by the intensity with which she fights against their well-intentioned plans. Lord Capulet in particular is outraged by her behavior. He feels that he has been spending years looking for a suitable husband for Juliet and now she refuses the splendid choice he has made for her. The more he thinks about it the more furious he becomes, and Juliet turns in desperation to her mother.

O, sweet my mother, cast me not away!
Delay this marriage for a month, a week . . .

But Lady Capulet will have nothing to do with her either. After they have left the room Juliet turns to the old Nurse, and the Nurse fails her too. For she is a practical old dame, and now that Romeo is so far away Paris makes a good second choice. It is her candid opinion that Juliet had better forget her absent husband and marry the fine young gentleman her father has selected for her.

O, he's a lovely gentleman!
Romeo's a dishclout to him . . .

Juliet knows there is no one left in her own home to whom she can turn, and her final hope is Friar Laurence. If he cannot help her, then she will kill herself.

Friar Laurence has a plan to offer her, a desperate one but not as desperate as suicide. He has a potion that will give her the appearance of death when she drinks it and keep her in a state of trance for forty-two hours. It is the custom in Verona for the dead to lie uncovered in the family vaults, and Juliet will lie in the Capulet tomb until a letter sent to Romeo brings him back to her. Then her husband will take her to Mantua with him and they will live there safe from Verona's law.

Lord Capulet hears with delight that Friar Laurence has persuaded Juliet to give her consent to the marriage, and his anger melts into warm approval of everyone concerned. Another feast is in prospect, his daughter has given up her strange and unaccountable behavior, and Lord Capulet is a joyful man.

Juliet keeps herself rigidly under control and tries to behave as normally as possible on the night before her wedding. She looks attentively at her wedding finery and speaks with careful naturalness to her mother and to the Nurse. But when they leave, her control breaks for she is very young and desperately alone. She is not even sure that she can trust the friar, for he may have given her poison to hide the illegal ceremony he performed.

In the famous scene that is called the potion scene, Juliet struggles in anguish with the frightening thoughts that come to her. She is close to the breaking point and cannot control her imagination at all. She feels the tomb already pressing down upon her—the heavy air strangling her, the skeletons of her ancestors waiting, the bloody body of the murdered Tybalt lying in its shroud. Driven half insane by her own imaginings, she thinks she sees Tybalt's ghost advancing to kill Romeo, and with a final cry to her young husband she drinks the potion and falls back upon the bed.

The family has been up all night with preparations for the wedding, and at daybreak the Nurse is sent to awaken Juliet and dress her as a bride. She finds her apparently dead, and wailing fills the house. Instead of a wedding the Capulets must prepare

for a funeral, and the "poor and loving child" is carried in solemn mourning to the tomb of her ancestors.

In Mantua, Romeo is waiting for news of his family and friends, and especially for news of Juliet. He is in a happy and hopeful mood when his servant arrives from Verona.

How doth my lady? Is my father well?

How fares my Juliet? That I ask again;

For nothing can be ill if she be well.

The servant tells him, as gently as he can, that Juliet is dead, and is frightened by the change in his master's face. Romeo steadies himself as long as the man is there, but when he is alone he turns back to the one thought that is clear in his mind. "Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight." He will not live without her, and he buys poison from an old apothecary before he leaves the city to return to Verona and his dead love.

Friar Laurence has sent the letter to Romeo as he promised, but there was a threat of plague in the city and he learns to his horror that the message was never delivered. Now it is only three hours before Juliet will awaken in the tomb, and since there is no one else he can trust, Friar Laurence decides to go to her himself.

It is night in the churchyard, and Paris comes to mourn at the Capulet tomb under the yew trees. He has brought flowers for the dead girl who was to have been his bride, and he leaves his page to stand guard in case anyone approaches. The page whistles a warning, and Paris stands back to see Romeo, armed with a wrenching iron, come to force open the tomb.

In the eyes of Paris, Romeo is an outlaw whose murder of Juliet's cousin caused her death through grief, and he attempts to capture him. Romeo tries to ward him off. "Good gentle youth, tempt not a desperate man." But Paris will not listen and they fight. Paris falls and has time to make one last request before he dies.

If thou be merciful,

Open the tomb, lay me with Juliet.

No request could touch Romeo more, and he takes the dead

man's hand as though it were a brother's. He lays Paris by his lost bride and then bends over Juliet with the beautiful, heart-broken lines that begin, "O my love, my wife!" They have parted from each other before in the night, but this time he will never leave her again. He takes Juliet into his arms, drinks the poison, and with one last kiss he dies.

Old Friar Laurence, stumbling over the graves, sees the light of a torch burning in the tomb and finds Romeo's servant on guard outside. There is blood on the stones, and he enters the tomb in terror to find Paris and Romeo dead.

It is time for Juliet to awaken and she stirs to find the friar bending over her.

O comfortable friar! where is my lord?

I do remember well where I should be,

And there I am. Where is my Romeo?

Friar Laurence can do nothing but tell her the truth. He tries to persuade her to leave the tomb, for he hears the noise of the watchmen outside. But she will not go, and the frightened old man leaves her alone with her dead husband.

There is no poison left to help Juliet die, but she finds Romeo's dagger. She must be quick, for the watchmen are coming and there is no time for more than one kiss.

O happy dagger!

This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die.

She falls upon Romeo's body, dead, and the tragic young lovers will not be parted again.

The watchmen capture Friar Laurence and arouse the city. The prince of Verona hears the tale and so do Capulet and Montague, learning that with their hatreds they condemned their children to death. Too late, they offer their friendship to each other, and the story ends as the two old men clasp hands in the brotherhood of a bitter regret.