

THE TRAGEDY OF
ROMEO AND JULIET

William Shakespeare

Preface

Few works of literature have crossed the centuries with the enduring power of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Written by William Shakespeare in the closing years of the sixteenth century, this story of two young lovers divided by hatred has become one of the most recognizable tragedies in world literature. Yet beneath its famous romance lies a darker and more complex work—a drama of violence, loyalty, family pride, youthful passion, and the devastating consequences of a conflict inherited from one generation by the next.

The play unfolds in Verona, where the noble houses of Montague and Capulet are locked in a bitter feud whose origins Shakespeare never fully explains. Their hostility has become so deeply rooted that it governs the lives of everyone around them. Servants fight in the streets, friends are drawn into quarrels, and even the younger generation is expected to accept divisions it did not create.

Into this world come Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet.

Their meeting transforms the play. Romeo, impulsive and intensely emotional, discovers in Juliet a love unlike anything he has previously known. Juliet, though young, quickly reveals remarkable determination and independence. Their affection develops with extraordinary speed, but Shakespeare presents that very intensity as both beautiful and dangerous. The lovers attempt to create a private world in which the names Montague and Capulet no longer matter, while the society surrounding them continues to be governed by those names.

This tension gives the tragedy much of its power.

Romeo and Juliet is often remembered above all as a love story, but it is equally a tragedy about time. Almost everything happens too quickly. Love follows meeting, marriage follows love, violence interrupts happiness, and desperate decisions are made before reflection can intervene. Again and again, the characters arrive moments too early or too late. A message fails to reach its destination. A plan depends upon precise timing. By the final act, a handful of lost minutes becomes the difference between life and death.

Chance certainly plays its part, yet Shakespeare never allows fate to carry all the responsibility. The tragedy is also created by human choices. Tybalt chooses violence. Mercutio answers provocation. Romeo acts in anger and later in despair. The older generation allows an ancient feud to survive long enough to consume its children. Even well-intentioned figures, such as Friar Laurence, discover that clever plans cannot always control unpredictable events.

At the center of the play stands Shakespeare's language. The lovers speak through images of light and darkness, stars and night, saints and pilgrims, life and death. Their first conversation forms a shared sonnet, immediately suggesting an extraordinary harmony between them. Elsewhere, Shakespeare moves effortlessly between lyrical poetry, bawdy humor, street violence, intimate confession, and solemn tragedy. The contrast makes Verona feel alive—and makes its descent into catastrophe all the more powerful.

The play also contains some of Shakespeare's most memorable supporting characters. Mercutio brings wit, imagination, and irreverence to the stage, yet his death

marks the decisive turning point from romantic comedy toward tragedy. The Nurse combines humor with genuine affection for Juliet, while Friar Laurence attempts to use the lovers' marriage as a means of reconciling their families. Tybalt embodies the destructive logic of the feud: honor demands retaliation, retaliation demands further violence, and violence perpetuates itself.

Juliet herself deserves particular attention. Although tradition often presents Romeo and Juliet simply as two equally doomed lovers, Juliet undergoes one of the most striking transformations in the play. She begins as an obedient daughter surrounded by parental expectations and gradually becomes a young woman willing to challenge her family, society, and even death itself in defense of the future she has chosen.

More than four centuries after its first performances, the tragedy remains compelling because its central conflicts have not disappeared. Young people still struggle against expectations imposed upon them. Families and communities still inherit rivalries whose original causes have been forgotten. Anger still turns disagreement into violence. Miscommunication still destroys relationships. And love still inspires people to imagine lives beyond the boundaries created for them.

The tragedy of Romeo and Juliet is therefore not merely that two young people die. It is that their deaths finally accomplish what their lives could not: they force the Montagues and Capulets to recognize the senselessness of their hatred. Reconciliation comes, but only after the price has become unbearable.

This cruel exchange—peace purchased through loss—is what gives the final scene its lasting force.

To read *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* today is to encounter far more than the familiar story of Shakespeare's "star-cross'd lovers." It is to enter a world where tenderness exists beside brutality, comedy beside grief, freedom beside social obligation, and hope beside catastrophe. Shakespeare asks what happens when love appears in a society organized around hatred—and whether people can escape conflicts inherited from those who came before them.

The answer is tragic, but the warning remains timeless.

May this edition invite both first-time readers and those returning to the play to rediscover the beauty, urgency, humor, and darkness of one of William Shakespeare's most enduring works.

William Shakespeare — Biography

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as one of the greatest writers in the English language and one of the most influential dramatists in world literature. More than four centuries after his death, his plays continue to be read, performed, translated, studied, and adapted throughout the world.

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, in April 1564. The exact date of his birth is unknown, but his baptism was recorded on 26 April, and his birthday is traditionally celebrated on 23 April. He was the son of John Shakespeare, a glove maker and prominent local citizen, and Mary Arden, who came from a prosperous Warwickshire family.

Although surviving records provide relatively little information about Shakespeare's childhood, he is generally believed to have attended the local grammar school in Stratford, where pupils received an education centered on Latin grammar, rhetoric, classical literature, and the works of ancient Roman authors. Such an education would later leave a visible mark on his poetry and drama.

In 1582, at the age of eighteen, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was several years his senior. The couple had three children: Susanna, born in 1583, and the twins Hamnet and Judith, born in 1585. Hamnet died in 1596 at the age of eleven.

The details of Shakespeare's life during the years immediately following the birth of his children remain uncertain. By the early 1590s, however, he had established himself in London as an actor and playwright. The English

theatre was flourishing, attracting large and diverse audiences, and Shakespeare quickly became an important figure within this rapidly developing cultural world.

His career was closely associated with the acting company known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, formed in 1594. Shakespeare was not merely a writer for the company but also an actor and shareholder, giving him an unusual degree of involvement in the commercial and artistic life of the theatre. After the accession of King James I in 1603, the company received royal patronage and became known as the King's Men.

Shakespeare wrote in several dramatic genres. His comedies include works such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*. His histories dramatized the lives and struggles of English monarchs in plays including *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*. His great tragedies—among them *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*—explored ambition, jealousy, revenge, political power, madness, family conflict, morality, and death.

The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, generally believed to have been written in the mid-1590s, belongs to the earlier part of Shakespeare's career. Drawing upon earlier versions of the story, Shakespeare transformed the tale of two doomed lovers into a drama of extraordinary poetic intensity. The play combines romance, comedy, violence, and tragedy while examining the destructive consequences of inherited hatred. It became one of his most enduring works and remains among the most frequently performed and adapted plays in the world.

Shakespeare was also an accomplished poet. During periods when London's theatres were affected by outbreaks of plague, he produced the narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. His collection of 154 sonnets, published in 1609, explores love, beauty, desire, betrayal, mortality, and the passage of time.

A major part of Shakespeare's theatrical career was connected with the Globe Theatre, constructed in London in 1599 by members of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Many of his greatest plays were performed there. Unlike modern theatres, the Globe brought together spectators from different social backgrounds, from those standing in the open yard to wealthier members of the audience seated in the galleries.

Shakespeare's achievement lies not only in the stories he told but also in the extraordinary flexibility of his language and characterization. Kings, soldiers, lovers, murderers, fools, servants, supernatural beings, and ordinary citizens all appear in his works with distinctive voices and motivations. His characters frequently resist simple moral categories, revealing contradictions that have allowed successive generations to interpret them in new ways.

During the later years of his career, Shakespeare increasingly wrote plays that combined tragic and comic elements, including *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*. He appears gradually to have withdrawn from London's theatrical world and spent more time in Stratford-upon-Avon, where he had purchased New Place, one of the town's largest houses.

William Shakespeare died in Stratford-upon-Avon on 23 April 1616, traditionally identified as his fifty-second birthday. He was buried in Holy Trinity Church.

Seven years after his death, in 1623, two of his fellow actors, John Heminges and Henry Condell, published the collection now known as the First Folio. This volume preserved thirty-six of Shakespeare's plays, many of which might otherwise have been lost. It became one of the most important books in the history of English literature.

Shakespeare's influence since then has been immense. His works have inspired novels, paintings, operas, ballets, films, musicals, and countless theatrical adaptations. His characters—Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, King Lear, Falstaff, and many others—have become enduring figures of world culture.

Yet Shakespeare's lasting importance rests above all on his ability to dramatize fundamental human experiences. Love and jealousy, ambition and guilt, loyalty and betrayal, youth and age, comedy and suffering repeatedly intersect in his works. His plays were written for the audiences of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, but the emotions and conflicts they explore continue to speak to readers and spectators centuries later.

That enduring universality has secured William Shakespeare's place not simply as a major English playwright, but as one of the defining figures of world literature.

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Dramatis Personæ

ESCALUS, Prince of Verona.

MERCUTIO, kinsman to the Prince, and friend to Romeo.

PARIS, a young Nobleman, kinsman to the Prince.

Page to Paris.

MONTAGUE, head of a Veronese family at feud with the Capulets.

LADY MONTAGUE, wife to Montague.

ROMEO, son to Montague.

BENVOLIO, nephew to Montague, and friend to Romeo.

ABRAM, servant to Montague.

BALTHASAR, servant to Romeo.

CAPULET, head of a Veronese family at feud with the Montagues.

LADY CAPULET, wife to Capulet.

JULIET, daughter to Capulet.

TYBALT, nephew to Lady Capulet.

CAPULET'S COUSIN, an old man.

NURSE to Juliet.

PETER, servant to Juliet's Nurse.

SAMPSON, servant to Capulet.

GREGORY, servant to Capulet.

Servants.

FRIAR LAWRENCE, a Franciscan.

FRIAR JOHN, of the same Order.

An Apothecary.

CHORUS.

Three Musicians.

An Officer.

Citizens of Verona; several Men and Women, relations to both houses; Maskers, Guards, Watchmen and Attendants.

SCENE. During the greater part
of the Play in Verona; once, in
the Fifth Act, at Mantua.

THE PROLOGUE

Enter Chorus.

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-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, nought 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.

[*Exit.*]

ACT I

SCENE I. A public place.

Enter Sampson and Gregory armed with swords and bucklers.

SAMPSON.

Gregory, on my word, we'll not carry coals.

GREGORY.

No, for then we should be colliers.

SAMPSON.

I mean, if we be in choler, we'll draw.

GREGORY.

Ay, while you live, draw your neck out o' the collar.

SAMPSON.

I strike quickly, being moved.

GREGORY.

But thou art not quickly moved to strike.

SAMPSON.

A dog of the house of Montague moves me.

GREGORY.

To move is to stir; and to be valiant is to stand: therefore, if thou art moved, thou runn'st away.

SAMPSON.

A dog of that house shall move me to stand.

I will take the wall of any man or maid of Montague's.

GREGORY.

That shows thee a weak slave, for the weakest goes to the wall.

SAMPSON.

True, and therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall: therefore I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall.

GREGORY.

The quarrel is between our masters and us their men.

SAMPSON.

'Tis all one, I will show myself a tyrant: when I have fought with the men I will be civil with the maids, I will cut off their heads.

GREGORY.

The heads of the maids?

SAMPSON.

Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads; take it in what sense thou wilt.

GREGORY.

They must take it in sense that feel it.

SAMPSON.

Me they shall feel while I am able to stand: and 'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh.

GREGORY.

'Tis well thou art not fish; if thou hadst, thou hadst been poor John. Draw thy tool; here comes of the house of Montagues.

Enter Abram and Balthasar.

SAMPSON.

My naked weapon is out: quarrel, I will back thee.

GREGORY.

How? Turn thy back and run?

SAMPSON.

Fear me not.

GREGORY.

No, marry; I fear thee!

SAMPSON.

Let us take the law of our sides; let them begin.

GREGORY.

I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list.

SAMPSON.

Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it.

ABRAM.

Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

SAMPSON.

I do bite my thumb, sir.

ABRAM.

Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

SAMPSON.

Is the law of our side if I say ay?

GREGORY.

No.