

Comments

"The permanent popularity, now of mythic intensity, of *Romeo and Juliet* is more than justified, since the play is the largest and most persuasive celebration of romantic love in Western literature."

– Harold Bloom

"There has been a recent fashion in the theatre to define a certain kind of play as a 'black comedy'. I would define *Romeo and Juliet* as a 'golden tragedy'."

– Dame Peggy Ashcroft

"It is Shakespear all over, and Shakespear when he was young."

– William Hazlitt

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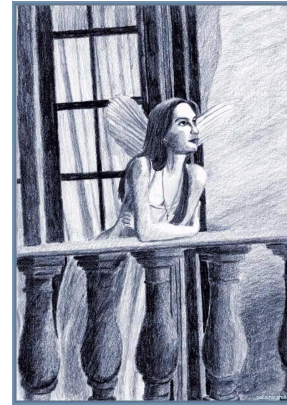
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Romeo and Juliet

a playgoer's guide



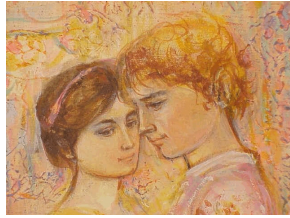
". . . the tragic action really starts under a moonlight balcony and ends in a vaulted tomb"

Summary of the Play

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 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.

Main Source of the Play

Shakespeare's play was inspired by the poem "The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet," written in 1562 by Arthur Brooke. In Shakespeare's day there was no concern for originality, and thankfully so, because most of his plays are not original. The glory of Shakespeare's writing lies in the way in which he transforms works that are already well-known and widely read. Shakespeare changes his play from the original poem in the following ways:



- expands on the character of Mercutio
- adds humour to the character of the nurse.
- shortens the time span of the poem from nine months to a week
- love is made difficult by human obstacles
- neither Mercutio nor the nurse can understand or verbally allow the possibility of not partaking in true love or self-sacrifice
- passion (i.e., the nurse wants Juliet to marry Paris for love).

Shakespeare also includes various other conventions of popular writing from his time. Francesco Petrarch was a Latin poet who wrote love sonnets. They were hugely popular and were known as "Petrarchan" sonnets. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo's lovesickness takes on the particular qualities found within the conventions of these sonnets:

- the lover takes a posture of subservience and suffering.
- lady love is placed on a pedestal.
- the lover pictures himself as a spaniel (hunting dog) who is chronically unsatisfied, but always loyal.
- connected with hunting and love pursuits.

The first meeting of Romeo and Juliet is actually written in the form of a sonnet.

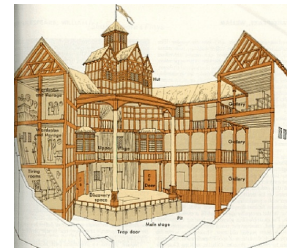
Tragedy vs. Comedy

Shakespeare's famous lovers Romeo and Juliet exist within a play that is surrounded by much controversy, especially when it comes to which genre it is to be classified as. Shakespeare who was famous for both his tragedies and his comedies seemed to take on a fresh direction when writing *Romeo and Juliet*. The reason for this is that it seems to contain elements of both types of plays.

Some critics have defined *Romeo and Juliet* as starting off as a romantic comedy that eventually falls into a tragedy. It is said that Shakespeare uses the comedy to delve into the characters' lives, which then in turn sets up the transition into a tragedy. In the early scenes Shakespeare establishes what seems a completely comic structure, and then begins developing his tragedy of love by developing the aspects of anguish within the story. It seems as if the play becomes tragic as time goes on.

In this reading, the turning point for the transition from comedy to tragedy occurs when Mercutio is killed. It is his death that essentially generates all thereafter – thus leaving the comedy scenes behind and entering into a world of tragic losses.

Theatrical History



Romeo and Juliet is possibly Shakespeare's most widely modernized play. However, not all interpretations reflect the original version. Although the first presentation of the play has gone undocumented, many scholars believe that it was performed in the late 1590's. They believe this because in the play, the Nurse mentions the earthquake that occurred eleven years before, and it is presumed that she is talking about the earthquake that London experienced in 1580. The first documented performance of *Romeo and Juliet* is from 1662, staged by William Davenant. Davenant was a well-known poet and playwright, who also claimed to be the illegitimate child of William Shakespeare.