



SOURCE TEXTS

Romeo and Juliet

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>ROMEO & JULIET PLOT VS TRADITIONAL TRAGIC PLOTS</i> | 2 |
| <i>WHERE SHAKESPEARE GOT HIS PLOTS</i> | 2 |
| <i>SOURCE TEXTS FOR ROMEO AND JULIET</i> | 2 |
| <i>AN ADDITIONAL POSSIBLE SOURCE TEXT</i> | 3 |
| <i>CONTEXT: AUDIENCE'S ENJOYMENT OF PRE-EXISTING STORIES</i> | 3 |
| <i>STRUCTURE - PLOT: SPEED OF THE ACTION</i> | 4 |
| <i>A QUOTE FROM 'AS YOU LIKE IT'</i> | 4 |
| <i>STRUCTURE - PLOT: ROMEO & JULIET'S 5-DAY PLOT</i> | 4 |
| <i>STRUCTURE – PLOT: EFFECTS OF SPEEDING UP THE PLOT</i> | 4 |
| <i>FORM: FATE - INEXORABILITY</i> | 5 |
| <i>STRUCTURE: THE PROLOGUE - OVERVIEW</i> | 5 |
| <i>STRUCTURE: PROLOGUES' FUNCTIONS - FATE</i> | 6 |
| <i>STRUCTURE: HOW THE PROLOGUE AND FATE</i> | 6 |
| <i>LANGUAGE: LANGUAGE OF THE PROLOGUE - FATE</i> | 7 |
| <i>STRUCTURE: THE PROLOGUE'S RHYTHMICAL STRUCTURE</i> | 7 |
| <i>FORM: TRAGEDY, FATE & THE QUESTION OF HUMAN AGENCY</i> | 8 |
| <i>CONTEXT: SHAKESPEARE'S SOURCES</i> | 8 |
| <i>CONTEXT: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BROOKE AND SHAKESPEARE</i> | 9 |
| <i>CONTEXT: BROOKE'S MORAL VS OTHER FORMS OF TRAGEDY</i> | 9 |
| <i>CONTEXT: THE FAMILY FUED AND MORALS</i> | 9 |
| <i>STRUCTURE: OVERDETERMINATION</i> | 10 |





ROMEO & JULIET PLOT vs TRADITIONAL TRAGIC PLOTS

When he came to write Romeo and Juliet Shakespeare had already tried his hand at tragedy, in Titus Andronicus and Richard III.

- But these had plots of the usual pattern for tragedy, which recounted the fall of some great historical or classical figure,
 - and the consequent distress caused to the society in which he lived.
 - Love was considered a subject for comedy –
 - lovers had comparatively slight troubles which could be cured,
 - and the comedy could have a happy ending.
 - Now Shakespeare wrote a new kind of tragedy.
 - It was not about one 'hero' but about
 - two young lovers,
 - the heroine quite as important as the hero;
 - their troubles led to their deaths,
 - and this did not disrupt, but healed, a disordered society.

WHERE SHAKESPEARE GOT HIS PLOTS

During the Renaissance/Early Modern period, was fashionable to write 'revenge' plays,

- but as the critic Professor Levin has pointed out, Romeo and Juliet is an 'anti-revenge' play.
 - Shakespeare did not invent the plots of his plays.
 - He found a likely theme in a
 - chronicle,
 - a poem
 - or a book of tales
 - or biographies,
 - and recreated it to suit his own purposes.

SOURCE TEXTS FOR ROMEO AND JULIET

There are several earlier versions of the story of Romeo and Juliet in

- French
- and Italian;
- and it occurs in an English collection of prose stories which William Painter translated from the Italian in 1567, which Shakespeare may have read.
 - But quite certainly he knew well the long poem –
 - over 3 000 lines –





- written in 1562 by Arthur Brooke, and reissued in 1587:
 - The tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet.
 - Not only are many details of the plot the same,
 - but Shakespeare's language
 - and images often echo Brooke's.

AN ADDITIONAL POSSIBLE SOURCE TEXT

Another source is possible;

- Brooke tells us that he had already, in 1562, seen 'the same argument lately set forth on stage',
 - and it is possible that Shakespeare had seen or heard of the same play,
 - and borrowed from it parts of his Romeo and Juliet
 - (for instance, the balcony scene)
 - which do not occur in Brooke's poem.
 - By noticing how Brooke's version is altered,
 - and to what effect,
 - we can perhaps discover what aspects of the story Shakespeare wished to emphasise.

CONTEXT: AUDIENCE'S ENJOYMENT OF PRE-EXISTING STORIES

Early-modern audiences may have been less interested in shock endings or surprise fiction than we may be

- Their humanist education system was suspicious of novelty, invention and in some ways, even fiction itself; it saw these things as morally-compromised
 - This taught generations of poets and playwrights that reworking, translation and rewriting existing texts were the sign of a poet
 - This is an intellectual environment called imitatio
 - The context of imitatio is that texts were based on a whole network of other texts that you also would know
 - This was also part of readers' or audiences' pleasure, to spot the sources in order to feel as though you understood the intellectual inheritance of the text
 - When John Manningham goes to see Twelfth Night at Middle Temple, for example, in 1602, his description of the play is that 'it is like *Comedy of Errors*'
 - Longer narratives in this period often had intermediate plot summaries, suggesting that the pleasure in reading was not in the fulfilment of being surprised at how things might turn out, but enjoying the variations on an established theme
 - This is also true of contemporary audiences; much of our own enjoyment comes about precisely because stories operate in existing narrative paradigms





STRUCTURE - PLOT: SPEED OF THE ACTION

In Brooke's version the story moves at a leisurely pace over some nine months.

- The lovers meet at a masked ball,
- and fall in love,
 - but 'a week or two' passes before Romeus dares to approach Juliet,
 - whereas Shakespeare's Romeo does not wait more than an hour or two before climbing into the orchard.
 - More weeks pass before Romeus' marriage,
 - and months before he kills Tybalt,
 - whereas Romeo kills Tybalt as he walks back from his wedding,
 - the afternoon after he first met Juliet.

A QUOTE FROM 'AS YOU LIKE IT'

Romeo and Juliet are well described by Rosalind, the heroine of *As You Like It*: they

- 'no sooner met, but they looked; no sooner looked, but they looked; no sooner looked, but they loved; no sooner loved, but they sighed; no sooner sighed but they asked one another the reason; no sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy ... they will together; clubs cannot part them' (V.ii.37).

STRUCTURE - PLOT: ROMEO & JULIET'S 5-DAY PLOT

The whole action of Romeo and Juliet takes place in five days,

- Sunday to Thursday.
 - It is not only the young lovers who are in a hurry. Juliet's father's haste to have her married to Paris speeds up the action:
 - CAPULET: ... bid her, mark you me, on Wednesday next / But soft, what day is this?
 - PARIS: Monday, my lord.
 - CAPULET: Monday? Ha, ha, well Wednesday is too soon; A' Thursday let it be; a' Thursday, tell her She shall be married to this noble earl. (III.iv.17)
 - And when Juliet seemingly agrees to the marriage, her father decides that it must be even sooner
 - - Wednesday –
 - 'I'll have this knot knit up tomorrow morning' (IV.ii.24). No chance to delay, 'we'll to church tomorrow' (IV.ii.37).
 - Tomorrow comes, after a night of bustle, but all the preparations are vain.
 - The bride is dead.

STRUCTURE – PLOT: EFFECTS OF SPEEDING UP THE PLOT





The speeding-up of Brooke's story not only

- highlights the impetuosity of the lovers,
- but adds great poignancy to the play;
 - they know that their first night together may well be their last.
 - The plot seems to gather speed as it goes on,
 - and the play moves faster and faster to its climax,
 - till things are happening so quickly that the slightest slip may well cause disaster.
 - Finally, it is only by minutes that Romeo arrives too early at the tomb, and the Friar too late.
 - Another effect of speeding up the plot is that it raises the question of fate and inexorability
 - As is often the case with tragedies.

FORM: FATE - INEXORABILITY

Inexorability is a major feature of Romeo and Juliet's chorus (prologue)

- It is one of the hallmarks of tragedy itself
 - There is a sense that it is all over before it has begun,
 - such as in Orsen Wells' modern version of Othello, which begins with the funeral march of Othello and Desdemona on the Cyprus battlements
 - It is all over before it has even begun
 - This is the same idea appearing in Romeo and Juliet's chorus
 - The message is 'don't hope for anything different; just relax and enjoy the show'
 - It is a fatalistic worldview

STRUCTURE: THE PROLOGUE - OVERVIEW

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 misadventured piteous overthrows
Do 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.





- What is the effect of having these clear statements as to what will happen, before the play begins?
 - Choric prologues to Shakespeare's play appear in the following plays
 - 1 in *Henry IV, part II*
 - 1 in *Henry V*
 - 1 in *Troilus and Cressida*
 - 1 in *Pericles*
 - Writing their book *Prologues to Shakespeare's Theatre*, Dug Brooster and Douglas Whyman identify the prologue as a kind of 'ritualized transition'
 - If it helps us transition between the turbulent world of the playhouse and the representational world of the play
 - It warns the audience that things are about to kick off
 - The effect may be similar to lowering the lights
 - By the 1590s about a third of plays had a prologue and by 1600 - 1610, they were seen as being old-fashioned
 - The other ones in Shakespeare tend to work to establish the scene; to tell us about the Trojan wars, for example

STRUCTURE: PROLOGUES' FUNCTIONS - FATE

Henry V subverts the function of a prologue to set the scene, by making a game of what really did happen

- It characterizes the prologue as a figure of rumour, dressed in a cloak, decorated with eyes and ears and set up the difficulty of knowing the historical past
- Henry V takes up another function of prologues and epilogues in the early-modern theatre
 - A kind of negotiation with the fact of stage representation
 - A consciousness of its power and its limitations or perhaps its power in its limitations
 - Shakespeare's prologues do many things, but none other does what *Romeo and Juliet's* does
 - Preview the plot, broadly speaking, in its entirety
 - We know what will happen
 - It is strongly teleological, heading inexorably towards a conclusion that is already strongly written
 - The chorus tells us that it is only through the death of the children that the parents' feud will be ended.
 - We have to get to that point

STRUCTURE: HOW THE PROLOGUE AND FATE

The lovers are dead, in our experience of the play, even before we meet them

- They are introduced to us, only to carry out this fatalistic plot
 - Not only does the chorus tell us the plot outline, but its sonnet form heads relentlessly towards a closing couplet
 - In this way, it can be seen as formally deterministic
 - Sonnet forms do not generally lead to surprises at the end





- The 'fatal loins' of the families contains the idea of fated as well as deadly
- The lovers are 'star crossed'
 - astrologically fated
- They are misadventured
 - Unlucky
- Their love is 'death-mark'd' even before it begins

LANGUAGE: LANGUAGE OF THE PROLOGUE - FATE

The language and world-view expressed in this chorus stress the inevitability, the prescriptidness of the events in the play that are still to come

- Baz Loman's 1996 film has the prologue delivered by a newscaster
 - The bland, almost formulaic structure of Shakespeare's verse and the absolute unwillingness to apportion blame first the after-the-fact, too late to change format of broadcasted news
 - What's on the news is, by definition, what has already happened

STRUCTURE: THE PROLOGUE'S RHYTHMICAL STRUCTURE

The sonnet's rhythmical structure serves the same purpose as its language

- The alternate end-rhymes form a kind of microcosmic version of inevitability at the level of the syntax or form of the rhymes
 - Once the pattern is established, we are just waiting for the rhyme
 - The rhyme comes inexorably
 - Each positive or relatively neutral term turns bad
 - Dignity becomes mutiny
 - Scene becomes unclean
 - Foes – overthrows
 - Life – strife
 - The language of the prologue, both in its formal structure and in its fatalistic content serves to underline the proleptic or spoiler-like presence of the opening sonnet
 - This anticipates later elements within the play which have a prophetic or proleptic element
 - Romeo's premonition, for example, just before the Capulet ball
 - 'I fear too early for my mind misgives / Some consequence yet hanging in the stars / Shall bitterly begin his fearful date / With this night's revels, and expire the term / Of a despised life closed in my breast / By some vile forfeit of untimely death.'
 - 'untimely' appears six times in this play





FORM: TRAGEDY, FATE & THE QUESTION OF HUMAN AGENCY

The popularity of tragedy as an early-modern form seems to reflect a cultural and historical interest in the question of agency

- Philosophies of causation in this period move from providential, theocentric ideas of Medieval Christianity (things happen because God makes them happen) via Machiavelli's unflinching stress on human significance and ingenuity and come out somewhere around the philosopher Thomas Hobbs' writing his theory on the social contract and leviathan in the civil war; things happen because people and individuals in particular behave in self-interested ways
 - In Romeo and Juliet, at the end of the play, the Prince announces, 'some shall be pardoned and some punished'
 - Who belongs in which camp is not clear but the suggestion that one of the important things to do at the end of the play is to meet out temporal judicial punishment, does point to the idea that human agents can be held responsible for what has happened
 - At the end of the play, there is less of a 'star-cross'd lovers' idea than there was at the beginning
 - If it was all always going to be like that, it is hard to blame any particular and probably minor character
 - In a story written in the Stars can you really blame the apothecary for bringing the poison?

CONTEXT: SHAKESPEARE'S SOURCES

So Romeo and Juliet is already written in some metaphysical sense because that's the genre of Tragedy

- And in a realistic sense the story is already written because it preexists Shakespeare.
 - Stories of doomed lovers existed long before the Renaissance.
 - But Shakespeare's source is the long poem written by Arthur Brooke, which is translated from an Italian source called the tragical history of romeus and Juliet, published in 1562.
 - Brooks poem also begins with a sonnet which is a useful point to put alongside Shakespeare's:
 - The Argument Love hath inflaméd twain by sudden sight,
And both do grant the thing that both desire
They wed in shrift by counsel of a friar.
Young Romeus climbs fair Juliet's bower by night.
Three months he doth enjoy his chief delight.
By Tybalt's rage provokéd unto ire,
He payeth death to Tybalt for his hire.
A banished man he 'scapes by secret flight.
New marriage is offered to his wife.
She drinks a drink that seems to reave her breath:
They bury her that sleeping yet hath life.
Her husband hears the tidings of her death.
He drinks his bane. And she with Romeus' knife,
When she awakes, herself, alas! she slay'th.





CONTEXT: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BROOKE AND SHAKESPEARE

Perhaps this helps us to see two things more clearly about Shakespeare's version.

- Firstly Brookes' version gives a small detail about what's going to happen, and the order of the events and clearly, some of the other details are different.
 - But he makes it quite clear that the responsibility is on the couple themselves and that their behaviour leads to their own downfall;
 - They have done certain things which have consequences.
 - There's none of that star-crossed or fated language of Shakespeare's opening chorus.
 - Even the type of sonnet form points this out;
 - Brooke wrote a sonnet which doesn't have a final couplet;
 - The form of his poem is less inexorable, less teleological.
 - So while Shakespeare might have taken the idea of having an argument or outline from Brook, he changes the motivation for the tragedy quite distinctly.
 - Brooke's prefatory material for Romeus and Juliet is all moralistic, largely anti-catholic.

CONTEXT: BROOKE'S MORAL vs OTHER FORMS OF TRAGEDY

Brookes' message is children should do what their parents say and they should have nothing to do whatsoever with friars.

- Brookes' poem as a whole is more sympathetic to the lovers than the initial framework but we can see that Shakespeare throws out this didactic notion.
 - However, it would be pretty perverse to generate from Shakespeare's message to do what your parents tell you.
 - Instead, although it is often argued that Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is not a tragedy in the strict traditional sense, it does appear to share some agreed characteristics of a traditional tragedy:
 - The tragic plot structure can be seen as a means to criticize the values of the society in which the protagonist(s) live, similar to Sidney's idea that tragedy lays bare the corruption of the rulers and statesmen
 - For example, in Shakespeare's version, the Capulets and Montagues engage in a violent ancient grudge over, what appears to be, their names.
 - Perhaps Shakespeare is pointing to the early modern obsession with honour as the root of the Capulet and Montague's feud.

CONTEXT: THE FAMILY FEUD and MORALS

The unexplainable and unjustifiable family feud and the distant and changeable parents are not presented by Shakespeare as sources of moral authority.

- This is not a play that says the parents know best.





- It's actually the opposite.
 - Shakespeare however can change the shape and morals of the story but he cannot change it so completely that the lovers escape their families and live happily ever after.
 - The tragedy retains its own inexorable shape.
 - The fatal law here is not just about genre but also about source.
 - Shakespeare transformed his sources from prosaic dross to poetic gold.
 - While this may be true, it is also the case that he's really unable to completely reshape them;
 - The source seems to trace out the narrative arc in a way that's completely irresistible; King Lear is probably the only exception to that.

STRUCTURE: OVERDETERMINATION

Romeo and Juliet is overdetermined by many preceding structures such as

- Genre
 - that of Tragedy
- and source;
 - The outcome of young love in Romeo and Juliet.
 - It starts to look as if this feature of hobbled agency is as much a feature of the playwright as it is of the characters;
 - They are all playing out a cosmically preordained script with none of that evitability that Snyder identifies as a roadmap for comedy.
 - So the chorus corresponds with and deviates from the source in interesting ways.

