

Three Shakespeare Tragedies



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THREE SHAKESPEARE TRAGEDIES

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THREE SHAKESPEARE TRAGEDIES

RETOLD BY
E. F. DODD, B.A.



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PREFACE

To the student of English as a foreign language, Elizabethan vocabulary and turn of phrase are not always easy to understand, and this makes the somewhat complicated plots of Shakespeare's plays difficult to follow; yet the beautiful poetry of the plays should be read in the original wherever possible.

It is hoped that this book will, in some measure, meet both these needs. Long excerpts from three tragedies have been quoted, and these may be read aloud or even enacted in class, thus familiarising the student with well-known scenes. On the other hand, the simple exposition of the stories should help to clarify the plots as a whole, so that comprehension will be easy when the full versions of the plays are eventually read.

E. F. D.

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ROMEO AND JULIET

ROMEO AND JULIET

I

IN the city of Verona in northern Italy there lived, during the early fourteenth century, two noble families, the Montagues and the Capulets. These two families had been bitter enemies for generations; and the enmity still continued, although the original cause of the quarrel had been long forgotten. If a servant of the Montagues met a Capulet servant in the street, a fight would almost certainly result; and the fight would soon take on the proportions of a battle as one person after another arrived on the scene. With a cry of 'Down with the Capulets!' or 'Down with the Montagues!' each new arrival would rush headlong into the fray to support one side or the other.

Escalus, Prince of Verona, was displeased by these constant brawls in the city streets, and after one particularly noisy fight he appeared on the scene and angrily reproached the heads of the two houses, who also happened to be passing just then, although they were in no way responsible for the struggle which had just taken place.

'Rebellious subjects, enemies of the peace!' said the Prince,

'If ever you disturb our streets again,
Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace.
For this time, all the rest depart away;
You, Capulet, shall go along with me;
And, Montague, come you this afternoon
To know our further pleasure in this case.'

And so saying, he returned to his palace, accompanied

by Lord Capulet; while Lord and Lady Montague walked slowly back to their home, accompanied by their nephew, Benvolio. Lady Montague was relieved to hear that her only son, Romeo, had not taken part in the recent fight. The older members of the two families were not so bitter in their enmity as the younger hotheads, and gentle Lady Montague did not encourage her son to risk his life unnecessarily in a foolish family quarrel.

Romeo's interests seemed, at the moment, to lie in quite another direction from battle and bloodshed, and Lady Montague asked Benvolio—who was one of Romeo's greatest friends—to try to find out what was troubling her son. For he *was* troubled: of that she was certain; and in her mother's heart she thought she knew the cause. But she wanted confirmation of her suspicions that young Romeo was in love; she wanted, too, to discover who was the centre of his affections; and she wisely entrusted her nephew (and Romeo's cousin and friend) to question Romeo on the subject. A man's first love is a very delicate affair, and more easily confided to one of his own age and generation.

Benvolio, with tact and sympathy, soon persuaded his handsome cousin to confide in him. Yes! Romeo was in love: in love, but out of favour, for the lovely lady took little notice of him.

'Tell me in sadness who it is you love,' said Benvolio sympathetically, and Romeo replied: 'What! Shall I groan and tell thee?'

'Groan? Why, no!' replied Benvolio. 'But sadly tell me who.'

'In sadness, cousin, I do love a woman.'

'I guessed as much when I supposed you loved!' said Benvolio with a smile. 'But she does not love you? Who is this foolish creature who does not love the handsome Romeo?'

'She has vowed she will never love anyone,' said Romeo with a sigh. 'And that is why I am lost in sadness and have no more desire to live.'

'Who is she?' Benvolio persisted, and Romeo told him that it was a beautiful Veronese lady called Rosaline.

'Take my advice and forget the fair Rosaline,' Benvolio said; for young Benvolio had not yet been in love and considered no woman was worth a broken heart.

'How can I forget? I only wish I could!' said Romeo, turning dark and mournful eyes upon his cousin.

'Of course you can forget!' said Benvolio briskly. 'There are plenty of other women in Verona—plenty of beautiful ones, too: quite as beautiful as Rosaline.'

'No one could be as beautiful,' the lovesick young man interrupted him, but Benvolio continued, unabashed:

'Tut, man! One fire burns out another's burning;
One pain is lessened by another's anguish;
One desperate grief cures with another's languish:
Take thou some new infection to thy eye,
And the rank poison of the old will die.'

Benvolio put his arm round Romeo's shoulders in an effort to cheer him. 'In short, cousin, cure your old unhappy love with a new, more hopeful one,' he finished.

'You mean....?' said Romeo doubtfully.

'I mean—fall out of love with Rosaline and into love with someone else!' cried Benvolio with a laugh.

Romeo did not, of course, take Benvolio's advice seriously, and he might never have given it another thought if a golden opportunity to see his Rosaline, that very night, had not suddenly occurred.

As they walked through the streets the two young men met a servant—a messenger-boy of some sort, apparently, for he carried a list in one hand, and was studying it and scratching his head in a puzzled fashion. He looked up eagerly at the cousins' approach and asked Romeo: 'I

pray, sir, can you read? Can you read anything you see?"

Romeo admitted with a grin that he could read, and the man begged him to read out the long list of names, some of which were puzzling him sorely. 'I'm to invite them to supper at my master's house,' the servant explained. 'My master is the great rich Capulet. And if you're not of the house of Montague, I pray you come, too. I am sure you will be welcome.'

Romeo, without admitting that he was a Montague, read out the names on the list, while the servant listened with frowning concentration, trying to remember every one: for the man was unable to read a word, though he was unwilling to admit it.

Romeo came to the final names on the list at last. 'My uncle Capulet and his wife and daughters,' he read. And then: 'my fair niece Rosaline.' Romeo looked at Benvolio and winked before continuing: 'Valentio and his cousin Tybalt; Lucio and the lively Helena.' He handed the paper back to the servant who ran off at once, muttering the names to himself.

'So the fair Rosaline attends this feast at Capulet's!' Benvolio said. 'Here is your chance, Romeo. All the beauties of Verona will be there. Go to the party, and compare Rosaline's face with some of theirs. I swear you will soon think your swan a crow!'

Romeo shook his head unbelievably. No one could be as lovely as Rosaline! 'But I'll go,' he agreed, anxious to seize any opportunity to be near his love.

II

Juliet Capulet was filled with excitement. Her father was having a big dance that night and she was to be allowed to attend. It was her first real dance and she was wearing her first real, grown-up party dress. What was

more, the handsome Count Paris, kinsman to the Prince of Verona, was to be at the dance, and he had asked her father for her hand in marriage.

Lord Capulet had thought Juliet was too young to consider marriage: she was not quite fourteen, and was his only living child. He did not want to lose her yet. But Lady Capulet pointed out that she herself had been only fourteen when they were married; also, the noble Paris was a most excellent match and they would never find a better or more wealthy husband for their daughter. And so Capulet had agreed to allow Paris to woo Juliet and try to win her love. If Juliet grew to love him, her father would be only too glad to consent to their marriage—but he would never force his beloved daughter to marry against her will.

And sweet young Juliet was ready for love. Dressed in her beautiful gown of silk and velvet, she slowly descended the stairs to the great hall, where many of the guests were already dancing. As was the fashion at dances in those days, most of the guests were masked: bold, flashing eyes and timid, languid ones alike were hidden behind masks of velvet; and no eyes were more beautiful than Juliet's: no mouth more gay and smiling: no face more lovely.

Juliet stood on the stairs and let her eyes wander slowly round the crowded room. Standing together by the main door were her father and his old cousin Capulet, sharing some ancient joke together and laughing uproariously. They were easily recognisable, for they had considered themselves too old to bother about masks; and beside them stood a tall slim figure whom—in spite of the mask covering his eyes—Juliet at once recognised by the flaming red of his hair. It was her cousin Tybalt, whose temper was as fiery as his hair. He even looked angry at this moment, as he stood staring into the crowd,

his hand resting on the hilt of his dagger. He turned to speak to the two older Capulets, and Juliet saw her father shake his head and place a restraining hand on Tybalt's arm; at which the young man pulled angrily away and left the hall.

'Now what is troubling Tybalt?' Juliet wondered, as she moved down into the throng and threaded her way through the smiling dancers to her father's side. 'Has cousin Tybalt gone?' she asked, and Capulet replied: 'It seems so, my heart. That young man's fighting spirit will lead him into trouble one of these days.'

Juliet laughed, remembering how Tybalt—even as a small boy—was seldom without a black eye or a torn ear, caused by fighting boys both older and bigger than himself.

'Surely, father, he was not thinking of fighting here?' she said, and her father answered: 'Indeed he was! He swears young Romeo Montague has come uninvited to our feast, and would have fought him then and there had I not forbidden him. What matter if young Romeo is here? He is welcome to enjoy himself provided he behaves like a gentleman.'

And Lord Capulet moved forward to greet another guest, just as Count Paris stepped up to Juliet and asked her to dance with him.

As she danced, Juliet was aware that a tall, dark-haired young man stood and watched her from a doorway, his eyes flashing through the slits in his mask and his handsome dark head turning to follow her as she moved round the room with Paris. Juliet wanted to ask who he was, but she was a little afraid of the solemn Paris who, at thirty, seemed almost old to her. And so she said nothing about the stranger, but was glad to find, when the music ended, that she and Paris were quite close to the doorway where the young man stood. He was still look-