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Romeo and Juliet

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

ROMEO AND JULIET

ROMEO AND JULIET

William Shakespeare

Edited by
CEDRIC WATTS



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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First published in 1992 by Wordsworth Editions Limited
8B East Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9HJ
This new edition 2000

ISBN 978-1-8402-2433-7

Text © Wordsworth Editions Limited 1992 and 2000
Introduction and editorial matter © Cedric Watts 2000

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Typeset by Antony Gray
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare Series, with *Henry V* as its inaugural volume, presents a newly-edited sequence of William Shakespeare's works. Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive paperbacks for students and for the general reader. Each play in the Shakespeare Series is accompanied by a standard apparatus, including an introduction, explanatory notes and a glossary. The textual editing takes account of recent scholarship while giving the material a careful reappraisal. The apparatus is, however, concise rather than elaborate. We hope that the resultant volumes prove to be handy, reliable and helpful. Above all, we hope that, from Shakespeare's works, readers will derive pleasure, wisdom, provocation, challenges, and insights: insights into his culture and ours, and into the era of civilisation to which his writings have made – and continue to make – such potently influential contributions. Shakespeare's eloquence will, undoubtedly, re-echo 'in states unborn and accents yet unknown'.

CEDRIC WATTS
Series Editor

INTRODUCTION

I

The hero and heroine of *Romeo and Juliet* are probably the most famous literary representatives of intense romantic love: consequently, many people know something of the play even if they haven't read it. But if they actually read it, they may well have some surprises. *Romeo and Juliet* proves to be stronger, livelier, more radical and more paradoxical than hearsay suggests.

Admittedly, in the twentieth century, various influential literary critics (A. C. Bradley, H. B. Charlton and D. A. Traversi among them) ¹ argued that this early tragedy by Shakespeare was variously immature, a failed experiment, a work marred by romantic sensationalism. It lacked, they suggested, the psychological subtlety and philosophical profundity of such later works as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. But there are many ways of gauging the success of a literary work. One test is the scale of influence; another (related) test is fertility, its ability to produce literary offspring. Some works have been splendid but of limited influence and fertility. By those tests, *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the two or three most successful of Shakespeare's plays, and, indeed, one of the most important works in the history of the world's drama.

The influence of *Romeo and Juliet* has been exerted internationally through countless stage productions, films for cinema and television, videos, radio, records, tapes, cassettes, adaptations and modernisations (including ballets, operas and musicals), parodies, burlesques, cartoons, tours of Verona, and even bank-notes – for the British twenty-pound note used to portray the first 'balcony' scene. If not profound and tempestuous, *Romeo and Juliet* is lively and engaging. Though the play is so famous, however, it has not always been fully appreciated. For instance, modern readers may

under-estimate the extent to which it is a political work – a work of sexual politics – whose influence has been extensive and, on the whole, good, helping to change the world for the better. Generally, the play's vitality depends on a range of contrasts or paradoxes, and I'll discuss some of them in the following sections.

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The origins of the plot are ancient. As early as the second century of the Christian era, Xenophon of Ephesus told the story of two teen-age lovers who become separated. The young woman, to evade marriage to a suitor whom she does not love, takes a potion which makes her appear dead, and for a while she is buried in a tomb; but eventually the lovers are reunited. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the tale was elaborated by various writers including Masuccio Salernitano, Luigi da Porta, Matteo Bandello, Pierre Boaistuau and eventually the English poet Arthur Brooke.

It was Brooke's *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet* (1562) which provided Shakespeare's main source. Brooke provided bases for most of the familiar characters and the main features of the plot; but his version, a long narrative poem, is pedestrian, prolix and rather naïve. In converting that verse-narrative into a play (first performed in or around 1595), Shakespeare has added direct physicality, lively movement, dramatic colour, intense vitality, and a diversity of modes of eloquence in poetry and prose, to what formerly was relatively inert. Everywhere there is new life, intelligence and questing cogency. Contrasts in characterisation, themes, style, tone and scene are repeatedly introduced or accentuated.

In Brooke, the time-scale of events is vague but lengthy: at least nine months elapse. In Shakespeare, the time-scale is dramatically compressed to just four days (from Sunday to Thursday morning), so that the momentum is impetuously rapid.² Furthermore, this momentum is given thematic force, for one of the main themes then becomes the attraction and danger of impetuous action. The love-relationship gains the intensity and poignancy of precipitate brevity. And Shakespeare not only enlivens the structure but also coordinates it very systematically. He provides numerous speeches of ominous anticipation and clarifying recollection, numerous dramatic ironies, and a range of recurrent leit-motifs or images – particularly the recurrent imagery of light against darkness. One

paradox of the plot is the prominence of both accidentality (most obviously, the miscarriage of Friar Lawrence's letter) and destiny (Romeo and Juliet are 'star-crossed lovers'). The paradox is crystallised in the recurrent term 'Fortune', which could either be merely a poetical term for fluke, chance and change, or could denote a supernatural power who deploys accident as part of a divine plan – 'All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see', a later poet declared.³ In the play, Shakespeare provides so many instances of impeded messages (beginning with the invitation which the servant cannot read) that even the miscarriage of the friar's letter begins to look like part of a design rather than mere bad luck.

There are further ways in which a comparison with Brooke makes clear Shakespeare's organisational skills. Brooke's poem begins with a sonnet summarising the plot; Shakespeare places a summarising sonnet at the beginning not only of Act 1 but also of Act 2, and (with superbly symbolic use of poetic form) lets the first dialogue between Romeo and Juliet blend into a formally perfect love-sonnet, and one which wittily plays on the meaning ('pilgrim or palmer') of the Italian name *Romeo* itself. They then embark on a second sonnet, but it is interrupted, perhaps portending the tragic outcome. In Brooke, the feud between the two main families is presented with relative vagueness as a matter in the background of the main action until the killing which leads to the hero's banishment. Shakespeare boldly emphasises the feud first at the outset, secondly near the mid-point (Act 3 scene 1), and thirdly at the conclusion, so that the contrast between the private and the public, the intimate and the political, becomes much more prominent and forceful. Brooke introduced Tybalt and Paris at a relatively late stage in the action; Shakespeare introduces them early on. This change not only gives greater coherence to the action; it also engenders suspense and cruel ironies, and enhances the variety by adding to the arrangement of mutually-emphasising contrasted characters. Paris becomes prominent as a noble, civilised and unwitting rival to Romeo. By rapidly establishing the implacable ruthlessness of Tybalt (now much more strongly characterised than in Brooke), Shakespeare adds to the sense of impending disaster and amplifies the contrast between impetuous hate and impetuous love. The play's profusion of minor characters helps to provide comic variety and to make amply plausible the society in which the

main action occurs. The love-story thus becomes inseparable from matter that, in various ways, is social and political. Masculine conduct, and even the definition of masculinity, is one of the coordinating topics; and the play offers plenty to interest feminists.

3

Although Shakespeare's Juliet is only thirteen years old (Brooke's was sixteen), she displays a precociously independent intelligence.⁴ Consider the famous 'balcony' scene, in which Romeo, standing in the garden, addresses Juliet at her window. Romeo attempts to offer the conventional rhetoric of the ardent lover:

Lady, by yonder blessèd moon I vow,
That tips with silver all these fruit tree tops[:]

but he is at once checked by Juliet:

O swear not by the moon, th'inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

Romeo, temporarily baffled by this shrewd rebuke, asks 'What shall I swear by?'; and she replies:

Do not swear at all;
Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
Which is the god of my idolatry,
And I'll believe thee.

Romeo starts again with 'If my heart's dear love' — and is again checked when she says:

Well, do not swear. Although I joy in thee,
I have no joy of this contráct tonight:
It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden;
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be
Ere one can say 'It lightens'.

Her forebodings prove accurate, since their love will indeed be short-lived. What is notable in the quoted exchange is that Juliet is shrewdly critical of conventional lovers' rhetoric; and it is criticism that Romeo needs. Although Romeo is probably several years older than Juliet, it is he who seems relatively immature and

callow. His protestations of undying love for Rosaline have abruptly given way to his fuller love for Juliet. The plot-summary in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* says that Romeo 'wins her consent to a secret marriage',⁵ but that summary falsifies the radicalism of the text, for it is Juliet, not Romeo, who decisively presses the courtship towards marriage:

If that thy bent of love be honourable,
Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow,
By one that I'll procure to come to thee,
Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite[.]

So, although she says that she will regard him as her 'lord', the play gives the impression that Juliet is actually shrewder and more decisive than is Romeo. Dramatically, greater emphasis falls on her than on him, for she is given the theatrical accolade of the later death.

The lovers' deaths have many causes, and a prominent cause is, of course, the feud between the Mountagues and Capulets. That feud, which has no substantial cause (the Prince says that its 'Three civil brawls' were 'bred of an airy word'), is maintained by the menfolk: it is they, not the women, who seek a pretext for fighting. This point is established in the play's first scene, when both Capulet and Mountague, though old, are foolishly eager to join the fray, and are symmetrically rebuked by their wives. Capulet's wife cries mockingly: 'A crutch, a crutch! Why call you for a sword?'; Mountague's tells her husband: 'Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe.' The opening sequence, in which Sampson and Gregory provoke the public brawl, clearly establishes that men who maintain the feud hold a commonplace but naïvely coarse idea of masculinity: in relationships with other men and with women, they think that aggressiveness is the sign of real manliness. Sampson's jocular boasting is characteristic:

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

To be manly, according to him, is to be both belligerent and sexually rapacious. In contrast, the play offers a different conception of manliness: one in which the relationship with a woman is

characterised by loving mutuality, not lustful force, and the relationship with other men is constructive and peaceful, rather than violent. That is when Romeo proceeds to marry Juliet (daughter of the Capulets) and afterwards seeks to be a peace-maker between Tybalt (now his kinsman) and Mercutio. Alas, at a crucial moment, he reverts to the aggressive model of masculinity. When Mercutio has been killed by Tybalt, Romeo says:

O sweet Juliet,
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,
And in my temper softened valour's steel!

Here he wrongly (and, in the event, tragically) misconstrues the constructive model of masculinity as an 'effeminate' enfeeblement. He proceeds to challenge and slay Tybalt, and is consequently exiled; the further confusions and the deaths of the lovers ensue. We might say, then, that the tragedies of Romeo and Juliet are a consequence of, among other factors, the choice of a primitive rather than a civilised definition of manliness.

In their love, Romeo and Juliet had disregarded the claims of clan and family. By their deaths, they end the feud. Though suicide is a mortal sin for Catholics, the play depicts Romeo and Juliet rather as martyrs and, indeed (according to the Prince), as agents of a divine rebuke:

Where be these enemies? Capulet, Mountague:
See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love;
And I, for winking at your discords too,
Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punished.

The older generation (including even the Prince) stands rebuked by the example of the lovers who prefer union in death to the division which was enforced by the patriarchal clan-system. Hence, in part, the enduring appeal of the play. It expresses a rebellion, in the name of love, by two young people against divisive and destructive prejudice. In a world which has witnessed slaughter occasioned by the enmities of Catholics and Protestants, of Jews and Muslims, of nations, sects, tribes and clans, the story retains its cogency.

4

These days, most young people in the western world take it for granted that marriage should be based on the free choice of loving partners. This is now an orthodoxy. Once, however, it was a heterodoxy: a belief which, in the eyes of influential people, was 'politically incorrect'. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* helped the modern view to triumph over the older view, which was that the choice of partners should (at least among the well-to-do) be made by the older members of the families concerned. Lawrence Stone, the historian and sociologist, has claimed that, until romanticism prevailed in the late eighteenth century, ardent love between individuals was idealised by 'some poets, playwrights and the authors of romances', but was condemned 'as a form of imprudent folly and even madness' by 'all theologians, moralists, authors of manuals of conduct, and parents and adults in general'. He continues:

To an Elizabethan audience the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* . . . lay not so much in their ill-starred romance as in the way they brought destruction upon themselves by violating the norms of the society in which they lived, which in the former case meant strict filial obedience and loyalty to the traditional friendships and enmities of the lineage. An Elizabethan courtier would be familiar enough with the bewitching passion of love to feel some sympathy with the young couple, but he could see clearly enough where duty lay.⁶

A careful reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, however, should make us doubt Stone's claims. His comments seem to imply that the domineering Capulet of Act 3, scene 5, is wiser than the chastened, forgiving Capulet of the play's close. Lawrence Stone himself notes that various Elizabethan noblemen married in defiance of their relatives' plans, and sometimes were jailed or disinherited as a result. Ralph Houlbrooke's study, *The English Family*, observes that such marriages for love were more frequent than Stone concedes.⁷ The very popularity, at all levels of society, of the literature of romance strongly suggests that the claims of personal ardour were increasingly being weighed against the claims of prudence and economic practicality. In the long battle between the conflicting ideas of a sound basis for marriage,

Shakespeare's plays – and *Romeo and Juliet* in particular – have eloquently voiced the idea which eventually prevailed. Germaine Greer (the famous feminist) has argued that in exalting the principle of wedlock based on love, in opposition to the Roman Catholic view that celibacy was a more honourable state than marriage, Shakespeare's originality may be overlooked:

... it is not easy for us to estimate Shakespeare's originality in developing the idea of the complementary couple as the linch-pin of the social structure. The medieval Church regarded marriage as a second-rate condition ... Shakespeare took up the cudgels on the side of the reformers ... He projected the ideal of the monogamous heterosexual couple so luminously [in his writings] that they irradiate our notions of compatibility and co-operation between spouses to this day.⁸

Furthermore, the dominance of the belief that marriage should be based on the free choice of loving partners is, historically, a relatively recent phenomenon, and more localised geographically than we may at first think. Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, remarked in her famous study, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1943):

Samoans rate romantic fidelity in terms of days or weeks at most and are inclined to scoff at tales of lifelong devotion. (They greeted the story of Romeo and Juliet with incredulous contempt.)⁹

C. S. Lewis's influential work, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), argued that the ideal of romantic love emerged in mediaeval Europe, burgeoned between the Elizabethan and Victorian ages, and came under potentially fatal attack from Freudians, feminists and others in the twentieth century.¹⁰ Freudianism suggested that this ideal was merely a sublimation of an impeded sexual desire: a cultural sophistication of physical lust.¹¹ Marxists claimed that the ideal emerged as a consequence of the bourgeois economic system, because freely-entered economic contracts introduced the idea of marriage based on the free choice of two lovers.¹² Accordingly, in David Lodge's novel *Nice Work* (1988), the heroine, a Marxist-feminist lecturer, reproaches thus the man who declares love for her: 'There's no such thing ... It's a rhetorical device. It's a bourgeois fallacy.'¹³