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William Shakespeare's ROMEO AND JULIET

Leonard Jenkin

威廉·莎士比亚的

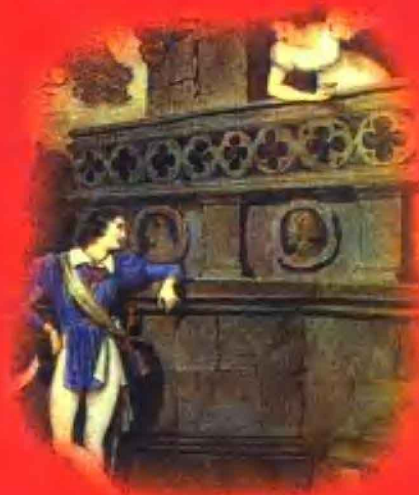
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INTRODUCTION

SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE: None of Shakespeare's friends or contemporaries wrote a biography of the man. This is not as strange as it sounds, although he was well known enough, for in Elizabethan England biographies were reserved for distinguishing the memories of officials of the church and the state. The consequence for us is that the life and personality of the greatest writer in English literature remains cloudy and ill-defined, marked only by the most perfunctory facts. Shakespeare's father was a well-to-do merchant and town official in the town of Stratford-on-Avon. John Shakespeare's third child and oldest son was christened William on April 26, 1564, and from that fact it is assumed that he was born on the twenty-third of that month since three days from birth to christening was the custom. Little enough is known of his childhood. He was probably educated at the free grammar school in Stratford, and perhaps saw an occasional simple play performed by a company of traveling actors. Although such schooling as Stratford provided would have given the young Shakespeare sufficient background in the classics of Greek and Latin to enter Oxford or Cambridge, he did not attend either of the universities.

At the age of eighteen, William Shakespeare married Ann Hathaway, a woman eight years older than he. It is possible that the marriage was a forced one, as their first child, Susanna, was born six months later. However, it was accepted at the time that engaged couples could enjoy all the privileges of married life, and perhaps Shakespeare had intended to marry Ann anyway. It seems

that domestic life did not go smoothly. Two or three years after the marriage, and following the birth of the twins Hamnet and Judith, the young Shakespeare appears to have left Stratford and gone to London to seek his fortune. The year was 1585 or 1586.

The twenty-two year old man must have lived gaily in London, frequenting the taverns he was later to present vividly in his plays. The theater of London was growing, and Shakespeare apparently apprenticed himself to the thriving art, becoming a stage-hand and actor, and trying out his hand at composing plays. By 1594 he had written *The Comedy of Errors*, had collaborated with another writer on some plays about Henry VI, and had become known as an actor in the company called the Lord Chamberlain's Players. He had tried his hand at poetry, publishing two long poems entitled *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and writing the famous sonnets which were not to be published until some years to come. Both the long poems and one of the sonnets were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, and it is possible that Southampton's patronage contributed to Shakespeare's rising fortunes. Two years later, in 1596, *Romeo and Juliet* was first presented. In that year also young Hamnet died, and Shakespeare bought a coat of arms for his father. In the following year, the playwright, then thirty-three years of age, was able to buy New Place, one of the finest houses in Stratford-on-Avon, for his family. By 1599, Shakespeare was able to buy a share in the newly built Globe Theater. At this time, *Julius Caesar* was first appearing on the stage.

In 1603, Elizabeth the Queen died, and James I of Scotland acceded to the throne of England. Shakespeare's company became known as the King's Men, and apparently gave private performances for the court. Surely the success of this acting company was largely due to

the plays Shakespeare contributed to its repertory, as well as to the virtuosity of Richard Burbage, the actor who must have performed Shakespeare's leading tragic roles. But while Shakespeare's worldly fortune continued to improve, his personal life seems to have darkened. In 1601 his father died, and with the appearance of *Hamlet* in that year, Shakespeare showed an involvement with chaos and tragedy that lasted until 1607. During this time he wrote the great tragedies. Financial success allowed him to end his career as an actor, and gradually Shakespeare, now over forty, began his retirement with his family in Stratford, where he settled finally in 1611. It was in 1611 that *The Tempest*, which is generally thought to be the last play Shakespeare wrote by himself, appeared. This is certainly an appropriate conclusion to the career of this playwright, for *The Tempest* resolves the tendencies of both tragedy and comedy in a peaceful, magical acceptance of life. Yet even in retirement, Shakespeare could not divorce himself from the theater, and aided in the composition of yet two more plays. In 1616, he died.

Shakespeare lived a full life. He was past fifty at his death, both his daughters were married, and he had written thirty-seven plays, some of which had been published. The merchant's son who had left his home for London under unclear and perhaps unhappy circumstances had returned as one of Stratford's most prosperous citizens. He was buried at the same church at which he had been christened, and within a few years a monument bearing his likeness was raised in his memory. In his will Shakespeare left the major part of his property to his wife, but he did not neglect the fellow actors with whom he had shared so much. His wife lived to see the publication of Shakespeare's complete works in 1623. The edition is known as the First Folio, and was collected by John Hemminges and Henry Condell, two of the actors of the King's Men whom Shakespeare

had remembered in his will.

SHAKESPEARE'S TIME: Shakespeare lived at a crucial and provocative time. Such famous writers as Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and John Donne were all born within a dozen years of Shakespeare's birth, and were publishing during his lifetime. The drama was just being recognized as a legitimate art form, and the first public theater was erected when Shakespeare was twelve. Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland & Ireland*, the source for many of Shakespeare's plots, was published only shortly after that. During Shakespeare's lifetime many events of historical importance occurred. France gave sanction to Protestantism; England made peace with Spain; the colony of Jamestown in Virginia was formed; Puritanism, with its moralistic disapproval of the theater, grew in strength; and the King James Bible appeared. Much was happening in the world of the arts as well. Queen Elizabeth pleased herself with masques—great costumed festivals held at the country homes of nobles—at which guests were entertained with costume balls, and with much gaiety in the form of singing, impromptu sketches, and spectacles. The growingly recognized art of the theater provided fertile ground for the efforts and innovations of a young playwright, and the dramatic art was taken up by many and developed at an explosive rate. All this was made secure by King James's sanction of the art.

Shakespeare's plays reflect this spirit of the time. His early plays were histories and comedies. The histories gave expression to the increasing patriotism felt by all Englishmen at this period. The comedies, which were as exuberant and vital as the age, were full of broad farce, slapstick, and romantic love, and revolved around very complicated plots. This involvement in simple humor and youthful

passion is expressive of the characteristic delight of a blossoming civilization in all the aspects of life. *Romeo and Juliet*, the only tragedy Shakespeare wrote during this period, is itself dedicated to the beauty of romantic love. Shakespeare's mind grew, however, in humanity as well as in sophistication. The underlying forces of life, the conflicts between good and evil, between order and chaos in man and his universe, began to take possession of his thoughts. This increasing awareness and perception of the difficulties of living were expressed by Shakespeare in his tragedies. The tragedies in turn are expressive of the darkening awareness, the consciousness of the evanescence of life and of the threat of death, which was also a part of the Elizabethan mentality as it grew in knowledge and sophistication. Shakespeare's tragedies, including *Romeo and Juliet*, are concerned with the flaws within man's nature, and the struggle he must make in order for good to win over evil within him. While the higher good is triumphant, the cost of the battle is death. These aspects show themselves in *Romeo and Juliet*, although the conflict is not internal, but external. Shakespeare's later comedies are permeated with this tragic sense almost to the point of bitterness. They deal with nature and society, sin and redemption, death and rebirth. While the plots could well evolve into tragedy, they affirm life and hope, with a deep sense of religion and faith. These comedies are filled with magic and poetry, and are far more complex than the early tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. At the end of Shakespeare's career, natural young love such as these lovers share was impossible without transformations performed by a higher power. The later comedies no longer focus on man; the need for a belief in something greater than man has begun to emerge. That this tendency too, was a part of the age, becomes apparent in the complete involvement with religion of such later writers as Donne and Milton.

SHAKESPEARE'S THEATER: During the Middle Ages and on up through Shakespeare's lifetime, dramas were often performed by townsmen in celebration of a church holiday. Along with this, companies of itinerant actors toured the countryside, and, being professional, such companies were welcomed at the towns they visited for the higher quality of their performances. There were no permanent stages, and performances were given on a platform quickly erected from trestles and planks. It became the custom of such companies to perform in closed inn-yards, charging admission to those who came. Such inner courts, besides providing standing room around the platform, afforded seats at the windows and balconies of the inn. It was on this arrangement that the Elizabethan theater was modeled. The central courtyard became the "pit," where the groundlings, or poorer, uneducated people stood. Projecting into the pit was the stage, elevated perhaps five feet from the yard itself to afford a good view. Around the central pit were a series of roofed balconies or galleries in tiers, where the wealthier theater-goers sat. The stage, because it projected into the pit, could be seen from three sides. Behind the curtain at the back of the stage was an inner stage, and the curtain could be drawn to show such non-portable stage properties as a bed, or a tableau of the next scene. There was a long balcony stretching around the inner stage from one side to the other, and there were doors at both sides of the stage for entrances and exits. No breaks were taken between scenes. Time and place, when important, are made clear by the dialogue. Uniformed, non-speaking actors, whom the audience ignored, carried the few necessary properties for a scene, perhaps a table and chairs, in and out; these "mutes" were accepted as the servants of the performance, and often during the middle of a scene one could be seen pouring wine or handing some more important actor his cloak.

Imagine *Romeo and Juliet* performed in such a setting. The action, without scene breaks and with constant activity and motion back and forth across the stage, would move even more quickly than it seems to as we read it, and would indeed be a "two hours' traffic" as is stated in the prologue. The balcony scenes would, of course, be played from the balcony, with the audience imagining the stage below to be Capulet's orchard, and Romeo indeed climbing down to the orchard by a rope ladder. When a quick change to the interior of Juliet's bedroom was called for, the inner stage would be revealed and the locale indicated by the presence of a bed. In the final scene, as Romeo breaks into the Capulet vault, the curtain would again be pulled back. There, on the inner stage, would lie Juliet in her coffin. If the coffin were placed where the bed had been, we would have a visual evocation of the imagery of love ending in a marriage of death. The Elizabethan stage was made for such effects. It provided a very flexible area for the action, and surely Shakespeare used this advantage to its utmost when writing a play. A constant demand was made on the imaginations of those who were in the audience, for only the costumes in the play were explicit. All the other trappings of reality, such as an orchard, had to be supplied by the viewer himself. Shakespeare exploited this demand on the imagination to the fullest, and at the same time he made it emphatically clear that this was not real life, but a play, both an artifice and a work of art. Not only did actors carry props back and forth, in *Romeo and Juliet* there is the added artifice of a chorus. The mere presence of a man on stage who was not a character but was there to speak directly to the audience brought home to every viewer that the actors were men like themselves, with personalities far different from the roles they had to play. Further emphasis on the art of the play, and further demands on the imaginations of the viewers, are inherent in such forms as the soliloquy and in the versification of the speeches.

Shakespeare did not feel he needed more than actors and words to persuade the audience of the reality of what they saw.

SHAKESPEARE'S SOURCES: Shakespeare's early history plays, such as *Richard II*, were in effect tragedies. In these plays, as was the current dramatic practice, he took his characters from history, choosing his heroes from among people of noble background and political power. *Romeo and Juliet* breaks with this tradition, for the hero and heroine do not have position and power in the world. They are Italians, a young boy and girl whose only status in life has been earned for them by the position of their families. The basic tale of the young lovers emerged from Greece when the Roman Empire was in power. A sixteenth century Italian novelist named Matteo Bandello had made the couple the subject of a novella. Arthur Brooke, a minor writer whose work was published earlier in the seventeenth century, used Bandello's story as the subject of a long poem entitled *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*. This Shakespeare read, and it became his source for *Romeo and Juliet*. This use of another man's story was not considered artistic dishonesty by the Elizabethans. Plots were a part of a tradition on which all writers drew, and what mattered was the presentation of the plot, its poetry, themes, and meaning.

Shakespeare changed Brooke's story, not in the actual events depicted, but in their interpretation. He wanted to portray the speed and impetuosity of young love. Instead of Brooke's method of stretching the action over a period of months, he condensed it into four short days and nights, presenting the audience with a continuous rush of events and dire complications. Thus he intensified the excitement of love, and gave greater emphasis to the threat of doom. From a rather ghastly, moralizing story, Shakespeare created a tragedy in

which love strives against fate and the feud, and triumphs in death. In Brooke's version, the death of the lovers is the punishment they deserve. Also, Brooke was prejudiced against Catholics, and presents the Friar as a pandering old man whose cell becomes an illicit meeting place for the lovers. Shakespeare has practically reversed this interpretation. He presents the lovers as full of the innocence, ardor, and idealism of youth, and he does homage to the passion and despair they share. He shows no narrow-mindedness toward Catholicism, and while the Friar's drug proves to be disastrous, the Friar himself is simple, pious, and kind. Last, but not least, Brooke's Mercutio is merely a bold, awkward, absurd young man. The Mercutio we know, with his wit, his scorn, and his loyalty to Romeo, is entirely Shakespeare's creation. Shakespeare has taken Brooke's story for his outline, and has transformed it into a vehicle that expresses his meaning to perfection. On the question of sources, the same story has been used recently once again, this time to express twentieth century conflicts, and the result was the musical, *West Side Story*.

THE PLAY: For years the peace of Verona has been periodically disturbed by the feuding of two families, the Montagues and the Capulets, who bear an ancient grudge. At the start of the play, this feud is revived by some troublesome servants. That very evening the Capulets are holding a traditional family party. Romeo, a Montague, accidentally learns of the party, and decides to crash it with some of his friends. At the party, he sees and falls instantly in love with Juliet, Lord Capulet's daughter. She returns his love and, after the party, the young couple woo each other in Capulet's orchard. It is a short courtship, for they agree to be secretly married the next day. Romeo then goes joyfully to see his priest, Friar Laurence, to arrange for the ceremony. He informs Juliet of the time

and place by giving a message to her Nurse, and the couple meet and are married that very afternoon. It is arranged that Romeo shall come to Juliet's bedroom at nightfall.

Romeo impatiently passes the intervening hours with his friends, among them the swift-witted Mercutio. As they walk, Tybalt Capulet appears. Tybalt had seen Romeo at the Capulet party and, feeling this to be insulting, he challenges Romeo to a duel. But Romeo, in the transports of love, is unwilling to fight his new cousin. Mercutio fights in Romeo's place, and is killed. This death is too much for Romeo. He begins to duel with Tybalt, kills him in turn, and flees to the safety of the Friar's cell. Verona's Prince declares Romeo's punishment to be exile. Both the lovers are beside themselves with misery at this new turn of events. They spend their first and last night together and part sadly. No sooner has Romeo left than grave news comes to Juliet. Her parents have arranged for her to marry a young gentleman named Paris, on the very next day. Unwilling to reveal her secret marriage and unable to dishonor herself and her love by agreeing to a second marriage, Juliet causes a huge family quarrel by refusing. Her father threatens to throw her out of the house if she does not change her mind, and Juliet hurries to the Friar for advice.

The plan decided on is a desperate one. Juliet will pretend to consent to the marriage, but the night before the wedding she is to swallow a sleeping potion which will make her seem to be dead. Her parents and Paris will mourn for her and put her in the family vault. The Friar will inform Romeo, who will be beside Juliet, when she awakens, to take her away with him. Juliet then goes home to her parents, carries off the deception, and takes the potion. The next morning, her official wedding day, she is discovered, believed dead,

and mourned pitifully. So far, so good. But as chance would have it, the Friar's message to Romeo never reaches him. When Romeo hears the news that his bride is dead, he determines to join her in death. He will go to her tomb and kill himself there. For this purpose he brings poison. At the last minute the Friar discovers that his message has not been delivered, and decides to go to the tomb and fetch Juliet.

Arriving at the tomb, Romeo meets Paris, who has come to mourn Juliet. Paris wishes to arrest Romeo for breaking his exile, and a fight ensues, in which Paris is killed. Romeo now enters the tomb, says his farewell to the sleeping Juliet, and takes the poison. Seconds after his death the Friar arrives and Juliet awakes. The Friar cannot persuade the girl to leave her newly-dead lover. He flees, and Juliet kills herself with Romeo's dagger. Again in a matter of seconds the watchmen arrive, find the three corpses and sound the alarm. When the two feuding families and the Prince of Verona are assembled, the Friar comes forward and explains what has happened. His story is corroborated by a farewell letter Romeo has sent to his father. Seeing how the feud has brought such tragedy to the secret love of the two young people, the Capulets and the Montagues decide to call an end to their feud, and peace is restored to Verona.

SHAKESPEARE'S USE OF CONVENTION: In Shakespeare's time, astrology played a large part in the lives of even the best educated men. It was believed that there were four humours of the body: blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile), and melancholy (black bile). These humours supposedly controlled not only a man's health, but his temperament. Only an even-tempered man had all these humours in the right proportions. If a man was limp and lack-

ing in drive, it was believed that phlegm was his controlling humour: that is, he was phlegmatic. Tybalt, with his quick temper, would have been judged to be controlled by yellow bile, or choler. Examples could be given for predominance of any of the four humours. These humours, in turn, were believed to be responsive to the positions of the stars and planets. This was called the "influence" of the stars, and the effect can be compared to the effect the moon has on the tides of the ocean. The planet Mars, when in a certain position in relation to the sun and the signs of the zodiac, was believed to cause a response rising from the yellow bile, and a choleric man such as Tybalt would be more easily angered at such a time. Thus the influence of the stars dominated daily life. Because it caused men to behave and react without knowing why, this influence was regarded as a kind of fate. Sometimes, upon the birth of a child, an astrologer would be called in to read the child's future, describe his temperament, and even chart out favorable and unfavorable years, months, and days. So we see that the description of Romeo and Juliet as "star-cross'd lovers" is not merely an image. From birth their controlling stars and humours had marked them out for a fate which was unavoidable. Even their love, which seemed to spring up so naturally and quickly at first sight, may have been considered by the Elizabethans to be pre-determined by fate. Certainly, the love was fatal. This romantic love goes with death, it must end in death; and if the humours of the lovers cause them to choose this kind of love, they choose their death at the same time. Shakespeare used this kind of imagery often.

Another important convention in the play is that of courtly and romantic love. During the middle ages the Church had much power over the minds of men. Love was first to be given to God. Gradually there developed an entire posture of love, in an effort to reconcile

earthly love with heavenly love. The woman who was the object of love became an object of worship, and was adored as though she were the Virgin. She became absolutized, a perfect celestial being, and to love her was the only means to ecstasy and sublime fulfillment. Yet such distance was not really desired by the lover. He prayed for her blessings, but by this he meant sexual favors. Thus romance entered the picture, and love became at once holy and profane. Secrecy and adultery were as significant a part of the emotion as religious transcendence. Courtly love was centered on this apparent contradiction, and the feeling that if the fruits of love were forbidden they became just so much more desirable. Still, much conflict arose out of the inherent paradox. In an attempt to reconcile profane love with the church, such love was regarded as requiring service to the woman loved, and great civility and courtliness. The ideal end was heaven on earth in a woman's arms. Yet the conflicting aspects of this one emotion remained. Out of a need for balance there arose a contrary current of jest, bawdy songs, and lusty stories or *fabliaux*. The tendency was to react against the divinity of woman by reducing her to a more natural state—that of a mere means for satisfying fleshly appetites.

These tendencies are apparent in *Romeo and Juliet*. When Romeo believes himself in love with Rosaline, he assumes the postures made famous by Petrarch, an Italian author of numerous sonnets. Petrarch has sensed clearly enough the conflicts inherent in the position of a courtly lover. The expression of these emotions through opposites, or contradictories linked together, was typical of Petrarch, and Romeo, like every youth who wished to be in love, imitated these postures of adoration and melancholy that had become famous. The impulse to pooh-pooh such ideals and attitudes as unnatural and funny finds expression in the mouths of both Mercutio and the

Nurse. The love shared by Romeo and Juliet is another matter, however, for Shakespeare succeeded in achieving a total and natural synthesis of the conflicting tendencies of love. There is still all the excitement of secrecy characteristic of romantic love, but there is no adultery. The lovers are married. The love is wholly an earthly one, but the lovers approach it with a holy innocence and wonder and newness, and commit themselves to it as totally and faithfully as if it were a religion. Indeed, it is their religion, and the end of it is in eternity, beyond life and death. There is never a doubt that theirs is to be a complete marriage, of bodies and passions as well as souls and imaginations. Even the devout Friar takes this for granted, and it is assumed that holy matrimony is not completed until physical union, as well as union of the hearts and souls, is completed by the lovers.

In order to achieve this synthesis, and to make this love both the most real and unique, and the most ideal and universal of all loves, Shakespeare chooses to retain the forms of conventional love poetry and give them new life. The first is the sonnet which the lovers speak at their first meeting: in style, a Petrarchan sonnet, dealing with a familiar idea of courtly love, the prayer for a kiss. The earthly passion of the desire to kiss is balanced by the hallowed atmosphere of prayer and forgiveness of sin. The two tendencies that are so much a part of the Petrarchan lovers' posture are clear, but are reconciled without strain. They do not seem in any way contrived or artificial. Juliet's invocation of her bridal night takes the form (except that there is no rhyme) of the epithalamium: a poem traditionally delivered before the consummation of marriage to celebrate the union of the couple. Her speech is a very passionate one, and the healthy honesty of this expression of passion makes the wedding poem both more pure and chaste, and more real, than the more