

4 Background for the Play

Star-Crossed Lovers

Written in 1594 or 1595, when Shakespeare was still a fairly young man, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* is a play about young love. The basic plot is simple: Two teenagers from feuding families fall in love and marry against their families' wishes, with tragic results. The story is set in Verona, Italy, and is based on an Italian legend that was fairly well known in England at the time.

Shakespeare's Sources Elizabethan writers deeply respected Italy as the birthplace of the Renaissance and often drew on Italian sources for inspiration. In 1562, an English poet named Arthur Brooke wrote *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, a long narrative poem based on the Romeo and Juliet legend. Three years later, a prose version of the legend also appeared in England. Scholars believe, however, that Brooke's poem was Shakespeare's chief source.

That poem contains a great deal of moralizing, stressing the disobedience of the young lovers, along with fate, as the cause of their doom. Shakespeare's portrayal of the young lovers is more sympathetic, but he does stress the strong role that fate plays in their tragedy. In fact, at the very start of the play, the Chorus describes Romeo and Juliet as "star-crossed lovers," indicating that their tragic ending is written in the stars, or fated by forces beyond their control.

The Play Through the Centuries Of all the love stories ever written, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* may well be the most famous. Acting celebrities down through the centuries have played the leading roles—Edwin Booth and Ellen Terry in the nineteenth century, for example, and John Gielgud and Judi Dench in the twentieth. There have been dozens of film versions of the play, numerous works of art depicting its scenes, over twenty operatic versions, a famous ballet version by Prokofiev, and an equally famous musical overture by Tchaikovsky. The play is often adapted to reflect the concerns of different eras: *West Side Story*, for example, adapts the story as a musical set amid the ethnic rivalries of 1950s New York City; *Romanoff and Juliet* is a comedy of the Cold War set during the 1960s. One of the most recent popular adaptations was the 1996 film *Romeo + Juliet* starring Leonardo di Caprio and Claire Danes, which sets the play in Verona Beach, California.

Elizabethan Language

English has changed a great deal since Shakespeare's time. Some of the words he uses are now archaic, or outdated. For instance, Shakespeare uses *anon* for "soon" and *haply* for "perhaps." He also uses outdated grammatical forms, such as the pronouns *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, and *thine* instead of *you*, *your*, and *yours*. In addition, Shakespeare's verbs often have archaic endings: *cometh* for "come," for example, and *dost* for "do." Word order, too, is sometimes different from modern English, especially in questions. For instance, instead of "What do you say?" Shakespeare writes, "What say you?" The numbered marginal notes that accompany the text of the play will help you with the unfamiliar language.

Extended Study: The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet 805

