

## AUTHOR – LIFE AND WORKS

**1564** William Shakespeare is baptised on 26 April in Stratford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

**1582** Marries Anne Hathaway

**1583** Birth of daughter, Susanna

**1585** Birth of twins, Hamnet and Judith

**1590–93** Early published works and poems written when theatres are closed by Plague

**1594** Joins Lord Chamberlain's Men (from 1603 named the King's Men) as actor and playwright

**1595** *Romeo and Juliet* first performed

**1595–99** Writes the history plays and comedies

**1597** Shakespeare buys New Place, the second biggest house in Stratford

**1599** Moves to newly-opened Globe Theatre

**1599–1608** Writes his greatest plays, including *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*

**1608–13** Takes over the lease of Blackfriars Theatre and writes final plays, the romances, ending with *The Tempest*

**1609** Shakespeare's sonnets published

**1613** Globe Theatre burns down 29 June, during performance of *Henry VIII*

**1616** Shakespeare dies, 23 April, and is buried in Stratford

**1623** First Folio of Shakespeare's plays published

## CONTEXT

**1558** Elizabeth I becomes Queen of England

**1568** Mary Queen of Scots is imprisoned for life

**1577–80** Sir Francis Drake becomes the first to circumnavigate the world

**1587** Mary Queen of Scots is executed

**1588** Defeat of the Spanish Armada

**1591** Tea is first drunk in England

**1593–94** Outbreak of the Plague in London, closing theatres and killing as many as 5,000 people, according to some sources

**1594** Queen Elizabeth spends Christmas at Greenwich and is entertained by the leading theatre company of her day, headed by James Burbage, William Kempe and Shakespeare

**1595** Walter Raleigh sails to Guiana

**1599** Oliver Cromwell is born

**1603** Elizabeth I dies on 24 March; James I, son of Mary, succeeds to throne of England

**1604** Peace treaty signed with Spain

**1605** The Gunpowder Plot

**1611** The Bible is translated into the Authorised (King James) Version

**1614** Fire sweeps through Stratford but New Place is spared

**1618** Thirty Years War begins

## SETTING AND BACKGROUND

## SOURCE OF THE PLAY

Shakespeare used a variety of sources for his dramas. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* was by all accounts taken from the poem, *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* written by Arthur Brooke (1562) though the original story may be derived from the Greek author, Xenophon.

The play was published in quarto form in 1597 so it is safe to assume it may have been written a couple of years or so earlier, during the first stage of his career. The Quartos, so called from their format (their page size), contained single plays and were sold for sixpence apiece. If this dating is correct, this play, with its range of characters and poetry, must be reckoned his first great one.

It is, however, unusual in that it is a tragedy, for the bulk of his writing in the early years was comedies or histories.

## INGREDIENTS OF A TRAGEDY

- The tragic hero should be of high, but not perfect, worth or standing.
- A tragic flaw, weakness or excess of arrogant ambition (hubris) leads to downfall.
- The effect of this, the catastrophe, on the spectators is the cleansing (catharsis) of the emotions of pity and terror through what they have witnessed.

To describe the play as a tragedy in these terms is appropriate only in part. Even if it does happen remarkably swiftly, the fact that Romeo and Juliet fall in love is hardly a tragic weakness.

Nevertheless the play is described as a tragedy and it is generally accepted that responsibility for their downfall lies outside the characters – in the workings of so-called Fate. It is the family feud rather than any moral weakness that leads to the deaths of the lovers.



## CHECK THE FILM

The first film version of *Romeo and Juliet* won an Oscar for Best Film in 1936. The cast was described as 'elderly'! 'Saved – by Shakespeare – from being a bad film', said Graham Greene.

### THE FRIAR AND THE WORKINGS OF FATE

Fate itself is seen to be the result of divine workings: as the play nears its conclusion, Friar Lawrence reports that he has begged Juliet to leave the vault and 'bear this work of heaven with patience' (V.3.261), whilst the Prince echoes the sentiment in his final rebuke to the families that 'heaven finds means to kill your joys with love' (V.3.293). Capulet and Montague shake hands to signal the end of the feud, securing what the Friar had always sought to achieve, 'To turn [their] households' rancour to pure love' (II.3.92).

In a wider sense, the play may be viewed as a dramatic representation of the perpetual conflict between love and hatred which enmeshes a pair of unfortunate lovers. Their deaths are the inevitable outcome, so the play is a tragedy in a looser sense than a strict interpretation of Aristotle's definition would indicate.

### ITALY AS A SETTING

Shakespeare chose Italy as the setting for a number of his plays. As far as one can tell, he never travelled abroad but Italy was regarded as a wealthy, romantic country where extravagant loves could properly be located. It is entirely fitting that an immortal tragedy should take as its backdrop 'fair Verona' (Prologue 2) in one of the homes of classical civilisation.

Sixteenth-century Italian **comedies** were especially high-spirited. They enjoyed the fun of sexual and social intrigue, particularly in the context of city life. Young men fall in love, often with wealthy heiresses. The Nurse's observation to Romeo (I.5.116–17), 'he that can lay hold of her / Shall have the chinks', suggests a common enough motive for love at that or any other time.

In such respects, *Romeo and Juliet* is a typical example of the European comic tradition.

Now take a break!

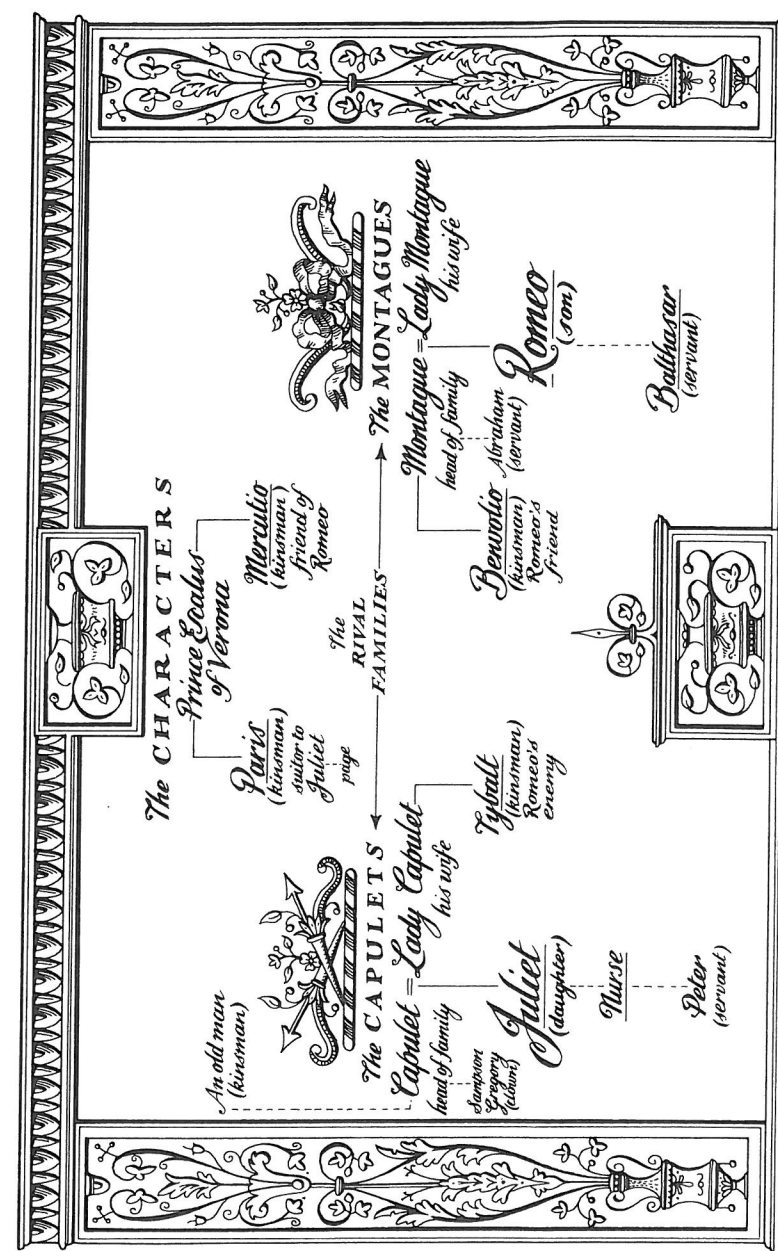


### DID YOU KNOW?

*Romeo and Juliet* was one of the first half-dozen plays that Shakespeare wrote.

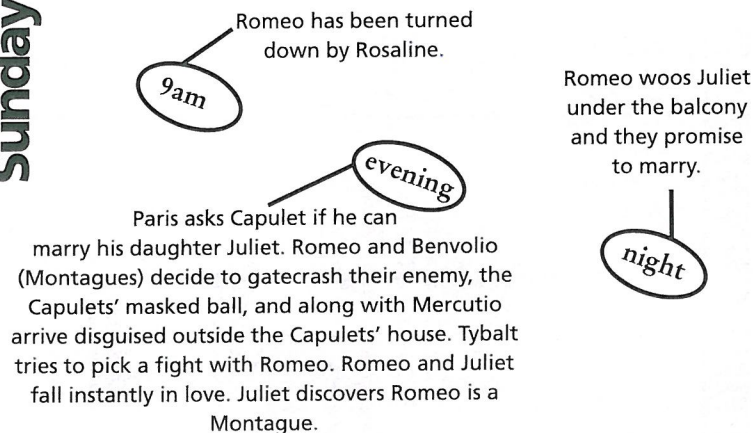
### GLOSSARY

chinks money  
rancour enmity

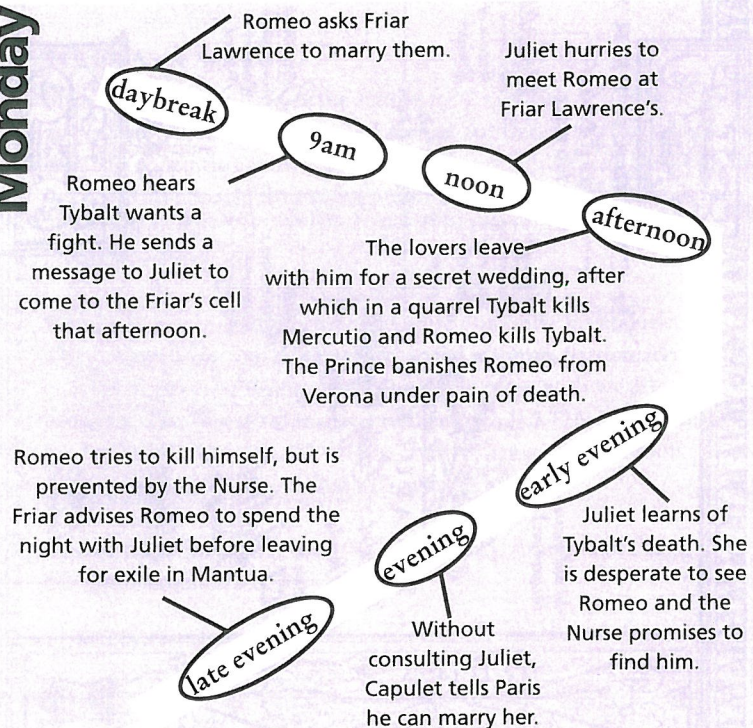




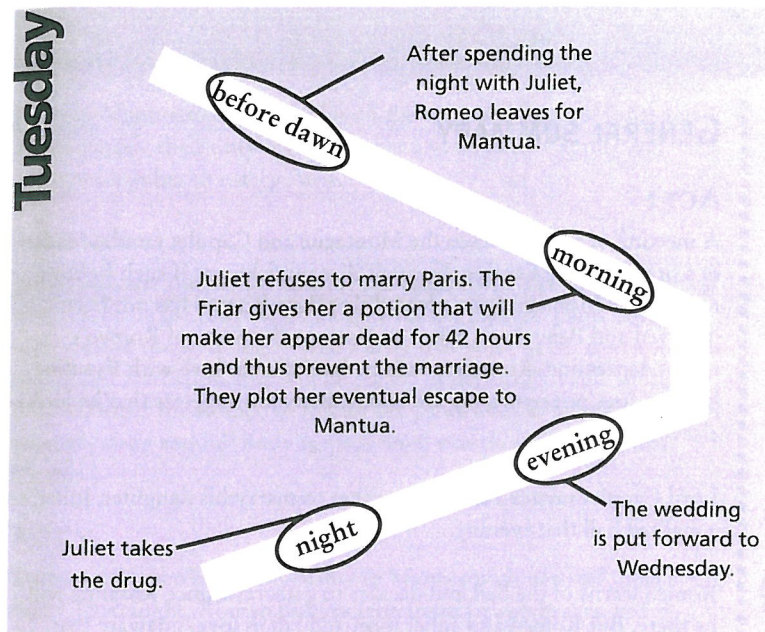
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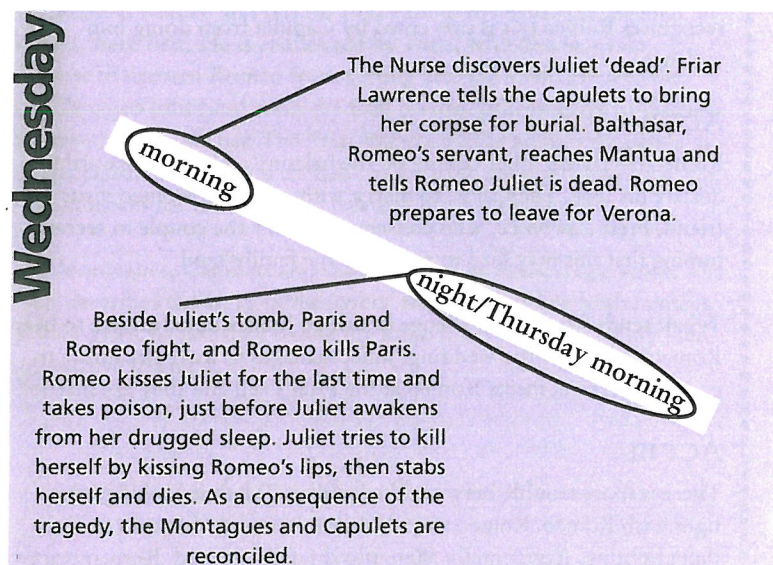
**Monday**



**Tuesday**



**Wednesday**



## SUMMARIES

## GENERAL SUMMARY

## ACT I

A meeting of servants from the Montague and Capulet families ends in a brawl. Prince Escalus threatens dire punishment if such fighting recurs. The Montagues are pleased that their Romeo has not been involved and Benvolio is asked to discover the cause of Romeo's recent depression. Romeo reveals he has fallen in love with Rosaline but she does not return his affections. Benvolio suggests that he look elsewhere.

Lord Capulet invites Paris who wishes to marry his daughter, Juliet, to a masked ball that evening.

Romeo learns of the ball and decides to gatecrash since Rosaline will be there. But Romeo and Juliet meet and fall in love, unaware that each belongs to the rival family. Tybalt, Lady Capulet's nephew, recognises Romeo but is prevented by Capulet from doing him violence.

## ACT II

Romeo overhears Juliet talking on the balcony and steps forward to declare his love. They agree to marry without delay. Romeo visits his friend, Friar Lawrence, who consents to marry the couple in secret, hoping that this may lead to an end of the family feud.

Tybalt sends Romeo a challenge to a duel. Juliet's nurse arrives to hear Romeo's plans for the wedding. Juliet manages to leave her house to go to confession, meets Romeo at the Friar's cell and they are married.

## ACT III

There is more trouble between the families. Tybalt is looking for a fight with Romeo. Romeo steps between him and Mercutio to stop them fighting. Accidentally Mercutio is fatally injured. Romeo reacts

**WWW. CHECK THE NET**  
www.shakespeare.sk gives the complete works of Shakespeare with a glossary.

violently. He fights and kills Tybalt. The Prince is again involved and sentences Romeo to immediate banishment. Romeo has gone to Friar Lawrence where they are joined by the Nurse. They plan to smuggle Juliet to Mantua to be reunited with the banished Romeo. Juliet and Romeo enjoy their only night together and he flees. Capulet and Paris arrange for Juliet to marry Paris.

## ACT IV

Juliet finds her Nurse has now turned against her. The Friar comes up with a scheme for Juliet to go along with her parents' plans but the night before the wedding to take a drug that will put her into a state of suspended animation. She will be placed in the family vault whilst the Friar arranges for Romeo to rescue her. Juliet does as he suggests, then takes the drug and her body is discovered exactly as the Friar had intended.

## ACT V

Balthasar, Romeo's servant, rushes to Mantua with news of Juliet's death. Distraught, Romeo buys poison from an apothecary and hurries back to be with Juliet. The Friar learns that his message has not reached Romeo and sets off to the tomb to release her. Romeo arrives there first. He is challenged by Paris, who dies in a vain attempt to prevent Romeo from getting into the vault. He sees the still-drugged Juliet and takes the fatal poison. Juliet revives to discover Romeo dead beside her. The Friar has eventually arrived though he is unsuccessful in his efforts to make Juliet leave the vault. Fearful of the consequences for himself, he leaves and Juliet stabs herself.

The Montagues, Capulets and the Prince arrive at the tragic scene. The Friar describes the story of the lovers' romance, uniting both families in their grief. At last they realise the futile misery of their family feud and resolve to end it.



The two top Shakespearean films were both versions of *Romeo and Juliet*: *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) by Baz Luhrmann; and *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) by Franco Zeffirelli.