

The Setting

The world *Romeo and Juliet*'s set in is completely different from twenty first century Britain. You don't hear Romeo complaining about rain, or the rubbish on telly, that's for sure...

The Play's Set in Verona — an Italian City



- 1) Verona is a city in the North of Italy. In the play it's a city state — a sort of small independent country. The Prince of Verona rules the city like a King. He makes the laws and everyone should obey him.
- 2) Shakespeare probably never went to the real Verona — it just happens to be where the story's set. It's based on an Italian legend in an old poem.

There's a Feud between Two Families in the City

There are two rich, powerful families in the play — the Montagues and the Capulets. They're in the middle of a feud — a quarrel that's lasted for years.

The play doesn't tell us how the quarrel started. It's not about anything. It's a habit the Montagues and Capulets have been brought up with. Now, they can't stand each other. They only need a tiny excuse to start fighting.

In the Verona where *Romeo and Juliet* is set, it seems like all the men carry swords. So if there's a fight, it isn't just a bit of a punch-up — it's a fight to the death.

Everyone Cares about Honour

- 1) The characters in *Romeo and Juliet* have a strong sense of honour.
- 2) Honour is the respect you get from other people. If someone insults you they're insulting your family, your friends and even your boss, so you can't ignore it.
- 3) Right at the start of the play, some servants of the Montagues and Capulets meet in the street. They start insulting each other and it turns into a fight.

Draw, if you be men.
Act 1, Scene 1, 54

Draw = draw your swords

Any man who doesn't fight for his honour isn't a real man — he's a coward.

- 4) The feud is causing deaths and mayhem in Verona. In Act 1, Scene 1, the Prince of Verona says he's had enough and the next person to start a fight will be executed.
- 5) But it's really hard for the Capulets and Montagues to give up the feud — honour is more important than saving lives.
- 6) The female characters may not get involved in the fighting, but they do care about honour and the feud.

Hungry for a fight — must have more feud...

Tsk, tsk, that pesky feud, always causing trouble. It's all a bit like fights between the mafia or different gangs. Not very nice in real life, but it makes for a cracking story in a film or a play.