

2023 Study Guide



The Impact of Environment

Environmental factors impact Shakespeare's telling of the story of *Romeo and Juliet* in a couple of important ways. Shakespeare makes a point of telling us several times that it is hot. This is five days in the height of the summer under blistering Italian sunshine, and the youth of Verona, with the short tempers people tend to get on extremely hot days, have nothing to do but pick fights.

The plague also plays an important role. Mercutio, a relative of Prince Escalus who has no direct connection to the feud, uses his dying words to call a plague down on both the Capulets and Montagues. Devastating outbreaks of plague were common in Renaissance Europe, and quarantining entire towns was not unheard of. Shakespeare's audience had just suffered through an outbreak in London the year before *Romeo and Juliet* premiered. So it was viscerally meaningful to them to hear that Friar Lawrence's letter to Romeo explaining Juliet's plan had not been delivered because the road was closed due to plague in a town ahead.



Romeo and Juliet

by William Shakespeare



Wikimedia Commons

The Danvers Long feud

In 1594, a chain of events occurred in England which may have influenced William Shakespeare's writing of *Romeo and Juliet*.

That year, the Long Family was furious over a judgement by Sir John Danvers, a local magistrate, which put Sir Walter Long in jail. Following his release, Sir Walter and family set about avenging the insult by provoking brawls in the streets of London, resulting in the death of a Danvers Family servant. Eventually, Danvers challenged Long to a duel, where Long was killed. Danvers took refuge with the Earl of Southampton (to whom Shakespeare had just dedicated two epic poems), who helped him escape to France. Queen Elizabeth forbade Danvers to ever return to England, on pain of death.

In 1595, the year after these events unfolded, William Shakespeare chose to dramatize the ancient story of a feud between two rival families. Coincidence?



Cobbe portrait of William Shakespeare, Wikipedia

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

- Born around April 23, 1564.
- Married Anne Hathaway at the age of 18. They had three children between 1583 and 1585.
- Became an actor and lead playwright for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men when King James I was crowned in 1603.
- Wrote 37 plays, 2 epic poems and 154 sonnets over a 25-year career.
- *Romeo and Juliet* was written ca. 1595
- Died in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23, 1616.
- Buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research Fortune as the Elizabethans understood it. Make the case that life is governed by fortune or fate. Define free will. Make the case that life is governed by free will. In what way can life be governed by both free will and fortune? This and other websites provide information:
<https://www.enotes.com/topics/william-shakespeare/critical-essays/fate-and-fortune>

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

Juliet, Act II, scene 2

2. What is a feud or a vendetta? What are some of the reasons feuds develop? What keeps feuds going for generations? Why is it difficult to end feuds peacefully? How common were feuds in Renaissance Italy? In Elizabethan England? When did feuds become illegal? These and other websites provide information:
www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%20281b/Philosophy%20of%20Magic/Dante.%20etc/Philosophers/End/bluedot/vendettas.html
<http://blog.shakespearesglobe.com/post/161054467023/violent-ends-in-elizabethan-england>
3. What are some ways that love is typically defined? What are the different types of love that exist between people? What are some ways that hate is typically defined? What are the different ways in which someone might express love and/or hate outwardly? What is the relationship between love and hate? This and other websites provide information:
<https://2019.playingshakespeare.org/language/love-and-hate-in-romeo-and-juliet/>
4. Who possesses the authority within a community? What is social stratification? Research and explain how and why socio-economic status can relate to authority within a given community. How can hereditary transmission (i.e., inheritance) perpetuate class structure? How does hierarchy remain even within a particular socio-economic class? This and other websites provide information:
<https://openstax.org/books/introduction-sociology-3e/pages/9-2-social-stratification-and-mobility-in-the-united-states#:~:text=Sociologists%20generally%20identify%20three%20levels,and%20perpetuate%20the%20class%20structure.>>
5. Consider the term “family.” What constitutes family? Make the case that a blood relationship is required to be considered family. What are the different ways in which

a blood relationship can be confirmed as family, or severed from family? Make the case that a blood relationship is not required to be considered family. What are the different ways in which a non-blood relationship can become family?

6. What is a sonnet? When did Shakespeare write sonnets and to what effect? These and other websites provide information:
<https://literarydevices.net/sonnet/>
<https://freebooksummary.com/the-shakespearean-sonnet-in-romeo-and-juliet-shakespeare-uses-sonnets-72443>

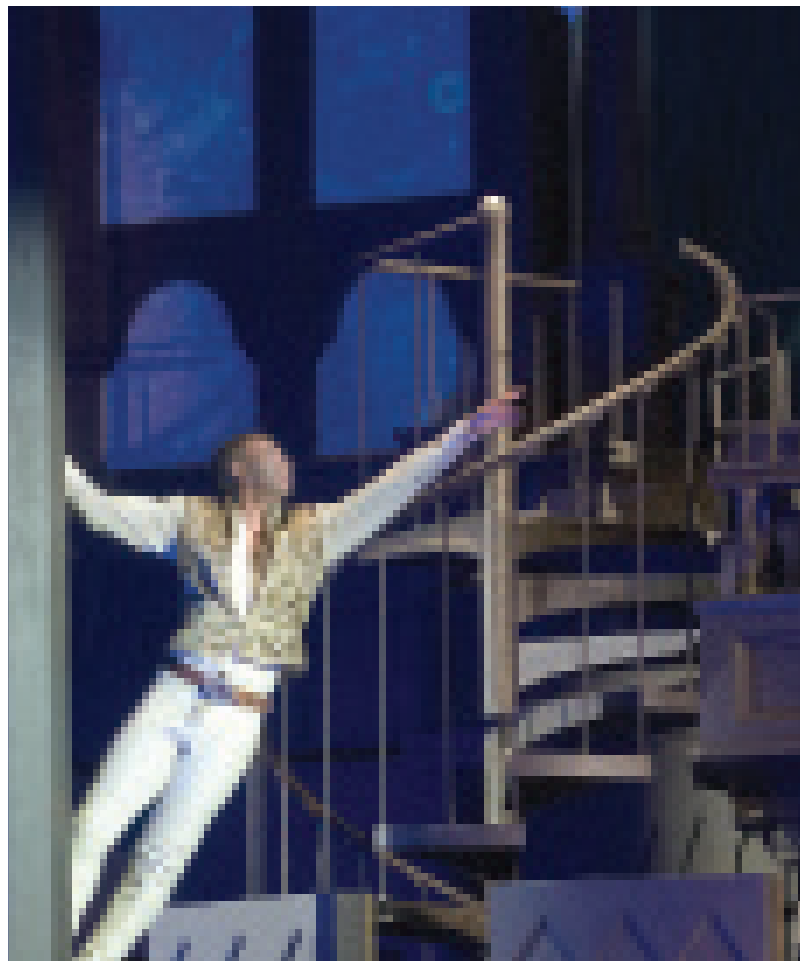
Resources

Films:

West Side Story (1961) by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins
Romeo and Juliet (1968) by Franco Zeffirelli
Romeo + Juliet (1996) by Baz Luhrmann
Still Star-Crossed – A series about the characters after the deaths of Romeo and Juliet

Learn more about Shakespeare’s life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>
<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>
<https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-life/>



After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on love and hate. Love means many things in the world of *Romeo and Juliet*. Pick any three of the following characters and describe for whom and how they outwardly express their love: Capulet, Lady Capulet, Nurse, Friar Lawrence, Prince Escalus, Mercutio. How does their love change throughout the course of the play?
2. Refer to your research on love and hate. Tybalt uses both “hate” and “love” to refer to Romeo and the Montagues. “...as I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee.” “Romeo, the love I bear thee can afford no better term than this: thou art a villain.” Are Tybalt’s actions in the play acts of hate, of love, or both, and why? What other characters contend with love and hate? In what other ways does Shakespeare use language to create and parallel the world of love and hate?
3. Refer to your research on sonnets. How is Romeo’s love for Juliet different from his infatuation with Rosaline? How are Juliet’s interactions with and about Paris different from her encounter with Romeo? What is love at first sight? How can such a passion be sustained over time? What do the language and structure of the initial exchange between Romeo and Juliet (Act I, scene v, lines 92-109) tell us about them?



4. In *Romeo and Juliet* love is a violent, ecstatic, and overpowering force that supersedes all other values, loyalties, and emotions. What is positive about this kind of passion? What is negative about it? How can love overwhelm a person the way it overwhelms Romeo and Juliet? In what way does romantic love overshadow other forms of love in the play?
5. *Romeo and Juliet* have three main friends and family members of their own age group: Mercutio, who is a relative of the Prince, Benvolio, who is a Montague cousin, and Tybalt, who is a Capulet cousin. Compare and contrast these characters. What is the significance of their names? How are they described by other characters? In what ways does each contribute to the outcome of the play?
6. Both Romeo and Juliet turn to Friar Lawrence for help. How does he assist them? What are the Friar’s intentions in each case? Why does he choose to act in secret? What are the results of his secrecy?
7. Review Friar Lawrence’s first speech (Act II, scene 3). What phenomenon is he describing? How does it play out in his actions and their consequences?
8. Refer to your research on socio-economic status and authority. In Shakespeare’s time, the term “villain” meant “a base or low-born rustic; peasant, farmer, commoner, churl, yokel” as opposed to the “criminal” connotation that we give it today. Why would Tybalt use this particular term to try to incite Romeo, and why does Mercutio intervene? What are other instances in the play where a character uses status to anger another character?
9. Juliet faces a marriage with Paris arranged by her father and Paris with no regard for her wishes. How does she respond initially? How does she respond later in the play? What are the advantages of an arranged marriage? The disadvantages? What choices are available for Juliet in regard to this marriage in the beginning? How do her choices change?



Maude Adams acting edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, Universities of California Libraries, Wikimedia Commons

10. Refer to your discussion of family. What relationships in the play would you consider family? Discuss the following relationships with regard to family: Lady Capulet/The Nurse and Juliet, Montague/Friar Lawrence and Romeo, Paris and the Capulets, the Prince and the city itself. What are the differences between the blood and non-blood relationships as they relate to family in the play? Compare Juliet's relationship to her family with Romeo's relationship to his.

Compare and Contrast the picture of OSF's 2018 production of *Romeo and Juliet* to the two pictures of the models for the set design of this production. What do you see?

What do you expect from this production?

11. Prince Escalus is related to both Mercutio and Paris, and is brought on stage immediately following their deaths. What is the significance or role of this third "family" in the play? How could the Prince's own losses affect their decision making? In what ways does the Prince try to end the feud? To what extent is the Prince responsible for the deaths in the play and the continuance of the feud itself?
12. Refer to your research on Fortune. What is the role of Fortune in the play? Which actions seem to be caused by Fortune or fate? Which seem to be the result of free will? What is the meaning of "star-crossed?" Do Romeo and Juliet fall in love because of fate or choice? What does Romeo mean when he calls himself "fortune's fool?" Are the action and outcome of the play driven more by fate or choice, and why?
13. What social and family expectations are placed on Romeo and Juliet? How does the conflict between those expectations and their individual desires create a dilemma for Romeo and Juliet? What is Romeo's dilemma when he learns that Juliet is dead? What is Juliet's when she realizes her plan has failed? Why do they feel that suicide is the only way out of their dilemmas? What different choices might they have made?
14. Refer to the sidebar on Impact of Environment on page 1. The play repeatedly mentions the heat of Verona. There is also reference to a plague within the city. How does the setting of this particular production, the threat of fatal disease, and overall climate factor in to the emotions and decision making that takes place? How might the decision-making and actions of characters be different if the physical circumstances surrounding them were different?

15. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* takes place over the course of five days. How does time factor in to the decisions, actions, and emotions of the play? What is the effect of monumental events such as street brawls from a re-ignited feud, falling in love with your supposed enemy, the death of loved ones, forced betrothal, etc., all happening in a short period of time? How might having more time have changed the choices made or the outcome of those choices?
16. *Romeo and Juliet* opens during a long-standing feud ("ancient grudge") between two families that has just been re-ignited ("new mutiny"). Refer to your research on feuds. What may have caused this particular feud? How do characters in the play keep the feud going? Prior to the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, what are some ways that the feud may have been put to rest? Who is responsible for the continuance of the feud: Montague/Capulet, Tybalt, the Prince, members of the households, or someone else? Is the feud over at the end of the play? Why might it continue? Why might it be over?
17. Refer to your research on social stratification. Which class (or classes) would you consider the characters of this particular production to be a part of? Use specific moments in the play to support your answer. Give examples from the play of how class relates to decision making. Who has more freedom and/or authority due to their class status? Who has less? How does class affect the final outcome of this production of the play?
18. *Romeo and Juliet* is a play filled with opposites: comedy/tragedy, old/young, light/dark, fast/slow, love/hate, rapture/despair, life/death, celebrating/mourning, tenderness/violence, immaturity/maturity, freedom/limitations. What effect do these contrasting images have on you as an audience member? How were these opposites highlighted in this production?



19. In the Prologue, the Chorus says of Romeo and Juliet's parents, ". . . the continuance of their parents' rage, / Which, but their children's end, nought could remove. . ." How do the deaths of Romeo and Juliet serve to remove their parents' rage? Who is transformed by the deaths of Romeo and Juliet? How?

20. In your opinion, what or who is ultimately the cause of the deaths of Romeo and Juliet? The feud, their parents, the Friar and the Nurse, Mercutio and Tybalt, the Prince, themselves, hasty actions, destiny, a combination of these factors, or something else?

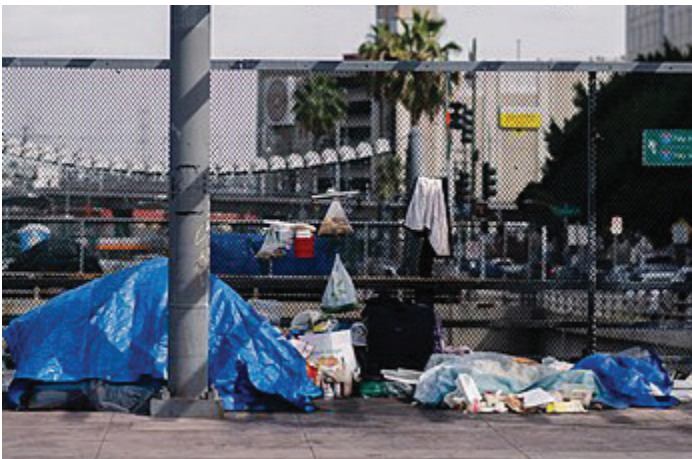
There is No "Supposed to..." in Shakespeare

No matter when we encounter Shakespeare for the first time, there is always the chance that a particular production will leave an impression on us. If we exist in an environment that is privileged enough to have regular exposure to the Arts, then we may even have a series of different Shakespeare productions shape our perception over time. We recall that one production that did it like "this" or that famous production that did it like "that" or the particular aesthetic of the particular region where we spend most of our time. This, along with whatever we have been taught in school or studied along the way becomes the way Shakespeare is "meant to be done"; yet in the same breath we claim that he is universal, and for everyone. The truth is, it is actually the flexibility of his work, and his understanding humanity, that allows him to change and evolve with us over 400 years later.

Take, for example, one of the most iconic scenes in all of English literature, affectionately referred to as "The Balcony Scene." Even without naming the play or telling you the Act or scene, most people could probably at least start us off with "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?" or "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou, Romeo?" What people may not

know is that Shakespeare never uses the word "balcony", as balconies didn't exist when *Romeo and Juliet* was written (1595). The first use of a balcony came decades after Shakespeare's death, from an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* by Thomas Otway in 1679, *The History and Fall of Caius Marius*. The lore of "The Balcony Scene" grew as Shakespeare's play regained popularity, but it was originally a product a playwright desiring to evolve and do something different with an existing work, following the ever-changing landscape of theatre. Read more about "The Balcony Scene" here: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/10/romeo-and-juliets-balcony-scene-doesnt-exist/381969/> (may require subscription).

Theatre is not, nor has it ever been, static. Shakespeare himself was an adaptor as most of his plays are dramatizations of history or based on already existing narratives. The First Folio, the earliest edition of his text that we have, was compiled years after his death, and due to inconsistencies with the printing press, no two copies are exactly the same. There is nothing, from his first recorded play in 1590 to this production of *Romeo and Juliet*, that has ever been irrevocably set. The beauty of Shakespeare is that it is a blank canvas, limited only by our understanding of humanity and our imagination.



Unhoused encampment in Los Angeles, Wikimedia Commons



E. Fortescue-Brickdale, Wikimedia Commons

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