



# Romeo and Juliet

Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting  
in Zeffirelli's 'Romeo and Juliet' (1968)

**Compact Performer - Culture & Literature**

Marina Spiazzi, Marina Tavella,  
Margaret Layton © 2015

**ZANICHELLI**



# 1. A very popular play

- It's one of Shakespeare's best-known tragedies: Shakespeare was the first to place **love** at the centre of a **tragedy**.
- It's the most famous love story of all times.
- There are several film versions.



Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting  
in Zeffirelli's 'Romeo and Juliet' (1968)



Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio in Baz  
Luhmann's 'Romeo + Juliet' (1996)



## 2. The plot

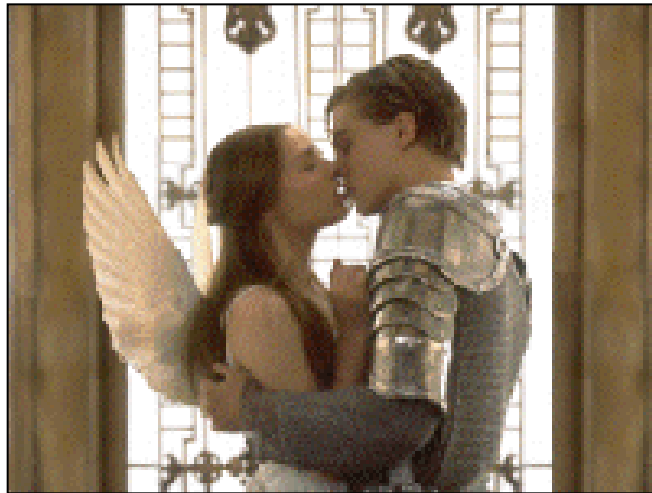
- The setting in place → Verona
- The setting in time → four days and four nights
- The protagonists → two rival families,  
the Montagues  
and the Capulets;  
their children, Romeo and Juliet.



## 2. The plot

The **first two acts** are a **love comedy**.

- Romeo and Juliet meet at the Capulets' ball and it is love at first sight.
- They are secretly married by Friar Laurence.





## 2. The plot

- The **real tragedy** starts in the **third act** with Mercutio's and Tybalt's deaths; Romeo is banished from Verona.
- In the **fourth act** Juliet drinks a potion to avoid the marriage with Count Paris.
- In the **fifth act** tragic conclusion of the play with the deaths of the two lovers.





# Italian sources

Shakespeare took inspiration from Italian Renaissance short stories, which were translated in other languages and became popular in Europe in the 16th century.

A similar story appeared in:

**Masuccio Salernitano's** *Cinquanta Novelle* (1476), but it was set in Siena and the two lovers' names were different.

Later, in a short story by **Luigi Da Porto** (1530) the story was set in Verona and the lovers' names were Montecchi and Cappelletti.

Finally, in **Matteo Bandello's** *Novelle* (1554) we find all the events of Shakespeare's play.



# Shakespeare's originality

Shakespeare improved on his sources on three main points:

- He reduced **the time of action** from several months to four days and nights thus heightening the dramatic tension (things happen very quickly, feelings become extreme).
- Differently from the previous versions, Juliet wakes up just after **Romeo's death**, thus stressing the importance of the **fatality of time** in the tragedy.
- Differently from the previous stories, he emphasized the **generation gap** between the young and the old: the young innocent lovers appear to be the victims of their tyrannical and cruel parents.



# 3. A comedy or a tragedy?

It is **a comedy** →

- the instant attraction of the young lovers;
- the masked balls;
- the comic servants;
- the surface life of street fights.

It is **a tragedy** →

- the tragic role of chance leading up to the deaths of the two lovers.





## 4. Themes

- The **lack of knowledge** coming from bad communication.
- **Speed** as the medium of fate.
- The **competition between the two families**.
- **Old hate vs young love**.
- **Different notions of love:**

**Absolute love** of Juliet, in contrast to other notions of love (for Juliet's father is a contract, for Juliet's nurse is physical attraction, for Paris is correct behaviour)



## Romeo and Juliet

- **Fathers and daughters:** Juliet, only 14, is strong enough to oppose her father's will. Shakespeare's women characters are not weak, submissive creatures (differently from the real social situation)
- The **reflection upon the language** made by Juliet: words are just a convention; they do not correspond to the essence of things.
- **Appearance vs reality:** tragedy comes from believing in appearance.



## 5. The two lovers



### Romeo

courteous lover, intense adoration of a chaste woman

### Juliet

though she is set within the courtly love convention, she is **unconventional** because she stands for innocence, belongs to no characterisation, is a real woman





## 6. Style

- Regular rhythm, use of rhymes.
- Use of the **sonnet** form in dialogue

• Imagery of **light**



linked to **life** and the  
courteous love convention

• Imagery of **darkness**



death



Romeo and Juliet

# The prologue

Two households, both alike in dignity  
(In fair Verona, where we lay our scene),  
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.  
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life,  
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows  
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.  
The fearful passage of their death-marked love  
And the continuance of their parents' rage,  
Which, but their children's end, naught could  
remove,  
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage—  
The which, if you with patient ears attend,  
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to  
mend.

Nella bella Verona, dove noi collochiam la nostra scena, due famiglie di pari nobiltà; ferocemente l'una all'altra oppone da vecchia ruggine nuova contesa, onde sangue civile va macchiando mani civili. Dai fatali lombi di questi due nemici ha preso vita una coppia di amanti da maligna fortuna contrastati la cui sorte pietosa e turbinosa porrà, con la lor morte, una pietra sull'odio dei parenti. Del loro amore la pietosa storia, al cui terribil corso porrà fine la loro morte, e dei lor genitori l'ostinata rabbiosa inimicizia cui porrà fine la morte dei figli: questo è quanto su questo palcoscenico vi rappresenteremo per due ore. E se ad esso prestar vorrete orecchio pazientemente, noi faremo in modo, con le risorse del nostro mestiere, di sopperire alle manchevolezze dell'angustia di questa nostra scena.



## Romeo and Juliet

**The prologue**, written in the form of a sonnet, introduces the story, telling us :

- the setting (Verona)
- the situation of two rival families
- the kind of story: an unhappy love story, where the protagonists are going to die.
- the important role of fate: the two protagonists are doomed.
- the lovers' deaths will put an end to the families' feud.
- the play is going to last two hours.



## Romeo and Juliet

# The ball

Oh, she shows the torches how to burn bright! She stands out against the darkness like a jeweled earring hanging against the cheek of an African. Her beauty is too good for this world; she's too beautiful to die and be buried. She outshines the other women like a white dove in the middle of a flock of crows. When this dance is over, I'll see where she stands, and then I'll touch her hand with my rough and ugly one. Did my heart ever love anyone before this moment? My eyes were liars, then, because I never saw true beauty before tonight.

ROMEO - Oh, ch'ella insegna perfino alle torce come splendere di più viva luce! Par che sul buio volto della notte ella brilli come una gemma rara pendente dall'orecchio d'una Etiope. Bellezza troppo ricca per usarne, troppo cara e preziosa per la terra! Ella spicca fra queste sue compagne come spicca una nivea colomba in mezzo ad uno stormo di cornacchie. Finito questo ballo, osserverò dove s'andrà a posare e, toccando la sua, farò beata questa mia rozza mano... Ha mai amato il mio cuore finora?... Se dice sì, occhi miei, sbugiardatelo, perch'io non ho mai visto vera beltà prima di questa notte.



## Romeo and Juliet

(*taking JULIET's hand*) Your hand is like a holy place that my hand is unworthy to visit. If you're offended by the touch of my hand, my two lips are standing here like blushing pilgrims, ready to make things better with a kiss.

**JULIET** Good pilgrim, you don't give your hand enough credit. By holding my hand you show polite devotion. After all, pilgrims touch the hands of statues of saints. Holding one palm against another is like a kiss.

**ROMEO** Don't saints and pilgrims have lips too?

**JULIET** Yes, pilgrim—they have lips that they're supposed to pray with.

**ROMEO** Well then, saint, let lips do what hands do. I'm praying for you to kiss me. Please grant my prayer so my faith doesn't turn to despair.

**JULIET** Saints don't move, even when they grant prayers.

**ROMEO** Then don't move while I act out my prayer. *He kisses her.*

Now my sin has been taken from my lips by yours.

(A Giulietta, prendendole la mano) Se con indegna mano profano questa tua santa reliquia (è il peccato di tutti i cuori pii), queste mie labbra, piene di rossore, al pari di contriti pellegrini, son pronte a render morbido quel tocco con un tenero bacio.

GIULIETTA - Pellegrino, alla tua mano tu fai troppo torto, ché nel gesto gentile essa ha mostrato la buona devozione che si deve. Anche i santi hanno mani, e i pellegrini le possono toccare, e palma a palma è il modo di baciare dei pii palmieri.

ROMEO - Santi e palmieri non hanno dunque labbra?

GIULIETTA - Sì, pellegrino, ma quelle son labbra che essi debbono usar per la preghiera.

ROMEO - E allora, cara santa, che le labbra facciano anch'esse quel che fanno le mani: esse sono in preghiera innanzi a te, ascolta, se non vuoi che la fede volga in disperazione.

GIULIETTA - I santi, pur se accolgono i voti di chi prega, non si muovono.

ROMEO - E allora non ti muovere fin ch'io raccolga dalle labbra tue l'accoglimento della mia preghiera. (La bacia) Ecco, dalle tue labbra ora le mie purgate son così del loro peccato.





### The ball

- In the first part (ll 1-10) Romeo talks to himself (monologue), using some **similes** to describe Juliet. She's compared as a torch (Juliet = light, purity), to a jewel (she's precious and beautiful) and to a white dove (beauty, purity).

There are a lot of words related to the sense of SIGHT (torch, burn bright, jewel, dove, shows, watch), typical of images of courtly love (spiritual love)

- The second part (ll 11-24) is a dialogue written in the form of a sonnet. Using a **metaphor**, Juliet is compared to a holy shrine and Romeo to a pilgrim.

There are a lot of words related to the sense of TOUCH (hands, lips, kiss, palm to palm), that evoke physical, passionate love.



## Romeo and Juliet

# The balcony scene

**JULIET** O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name.

Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,

And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

**ROMEO** (*aside*) Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

**JULIET** (*still not knowing ROMEO hears her*) It's only your name that's my enemy. You'd still be yourself even if you stopped being a Montague. What's a Montague anyway? It isn't a hand, a foot, an arm, a face, or any other part of a man. Oh, be some other name! What does a name mean? The thing we call a rose would smell just as sweet if we called it by any other name. Romeo would be just as perfect even if he wasn't called Romeo. Romeo, lose your name. Trade in your name—which really has nothing to do with you—and take all of me in exchange.

**Giulietta:** o Romeo, Romeo, perchè sei tu Romeo? Rinnega tuo padre e rifiuta il tuo stesso nome. Ovvero, se proprio non lo vuoi fare, giurami soltanto che mi ami, ed io smetterò di essere una capuleti.

**Romeo:** devo continuare ad ascoltarla oppure rispondere a ciò che dice ?

**Giulietta:** è solamente il tuo nome ad essermi ostile: tu saresti sempre lo stesso anche se non fossi un Montecchi. Che cosa vuol dire la parola Montecchi? non è una mano, o un braccio o un viso, né un'altra parte che appartiene ad un essere umano. Oh, sii qualche altro nome! Quello che noi chiamiamo col nome di rosa, anche chiamato con un nome diverso, conserverebbe ugualmente il suo dolce profumo. Allo stesso modo Romeo, se portasse un'altro nome, avrebbe sempre quella rara perfezione che possiede anche senza quel nome. Rinuncia quindi al tuo nome, Romeo, ed in cambio di quello, che tuttavia non è una parte di te, accogli tutta me stessa.



## Romeo and Juliet

**ROMEO** (to JULIET) I trust your words. Just call me your love, and I will take a new name. From now on I will never be Romeo again.

**JULIET** Who are you? Why do you hide in the darkness and listen to my private thoughts?

**ROMEO** I don't know how to tell you who I am by telling you a name. I hate my name, dear saint, because my name is your enemy. If I had it written down, I would tear up the paper.

...

**JULIET** You can't see my face because it's dark out. Otherwise, you'd see me blushing about the things you've heard me say tonight. I would be happy to keep up good manners and deny the things I said. But forget about good manners. Do you love me? I know you'll say "yes," and I'll believe you. But if you swear you love me, you might turn out to be lying. They say Jove (also called Jupiter, was the king of the Roman gods) laughs when lovers lie to each other. Oh Romeo, if you really love me, say it truly. Or if you think it's too easy and quick to win my heart, I'll frown and play hard-to-get, as long as that will make you try to win me, but otherwise I wouldn't act that way for anything.

**Romeo:** ti prendo in parola. D'ora in avanti non sarò più Romeo.

**Giulietta:** chi sei tu, così nascosto dalla notte, che inciampi nei miei pensieri più nascosti?

**Romeo:** non so dirti chi sono, adoperando un nome. Perché il mio nome, o diletta santa, è odioso a me stesso, perché è nemico a te. E nondimeno strapperei il foglio dove lo trovassi scritto.

...

**Giulietta:** tu sai che sul mio volto vi è la maschera della notte, altrimenti un verginale rossore colorerebbe le mie guancie, a causa di quello che mi hai sentito dire stanotte. E molto volentieri mi piacerebbe rinnegare tutto ciò che ho detto. Ma basta con le forme e i convenevoli. Mi ami? So già che risponderai sì, e che io crederò a ciò che tu dirai. Ma se lo giuri, potresti poi dimostrarti sleale. Dicono che Giove sorrida dei giuramenti degli amanti. O, nobile Romeo, se davvero mi ami, dillo apertamente, e se credi che io mi lasci conquistare troppo facilmente, arriccierò la fronte e sarò cattiva, e mi negherò, cosicché tu abbia ragione di corteggiarmi: altrimenti, non saprei negarti niente per tutto l'oro del mondo.



## Romeo and Juliet

In truth, handsome Montague, I like you too much, so you may think my behavior is loose. But trust me, gentleman, I'll prove myself more faithful than girls who act coy and play hard-to-get. I should have been more standoffish, I confess, but you overheard me talking about the love in my heart when I didn't know you were there. So excuse me, and do not assume that because you made me love you so easily my love isn't serious.

O bel Montecchi, io sono davvero troppo innamorata, e tu potresti interpretare questo comportamento come frivolo. Ma abbi fede in me, mio buon signore, ed io saprò dimostrarmi anche più leali di coloro che sanno offrire in modo migliore la loro modestia.



### The balcony scene

- **Juliet's monologue** (ll 1-12): it's a very modern reflection on the arbitrary nature of language; a word doesn't correspond to the essence of things, it's just a convention. Juliet shows the difference between appearance (the name "Romeo", a Montague) and reality (a man).
- **Dialogue** (ll 13-44): Juliet is ashamed because she has declared her love, not knowing that Romeo was listening to her. She acted against the conventional women's behaviour (a girl shouldn't reveal her love!), but now she confirms her love in front of Romeo and she tells him not to interpret this as a sign of superficiality, because her love is true and deep.

Romeo is romantic and artful in his words, while Juliet is more direct, she's a concrete, passionate, unconventional girl who returns Romeo's love.