

# TEACHER'S GUIDE

## Romeo and Juliet

Package prepared by  
Dr. Thelma Devoe  
Bunker Hill Community College  
Charlestown, Ma.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Although we have less information about his personal life than we would wish to, we know enough to be sure that he did indeed write the plays that made him known as the greatest of the world's dramatists. The son of John Shakespeare, a businessman and active citizen, Shakespeare presumably went to the town school, where he probably received a good education at the hands of a university-trained master. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway; they had three children. Aside from these facts, all we know is that he reached London in the late 1580's and soon became well-known as a playwright and poet. In 1594 he helped form a theatre company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which in 1603 became the King's Men, and became a partner in the Globe Theatre, where the company performed. He supposedly acted small parts in his own plays, including the Ghost in *Hamlet*. His success in the theatre allowed him to purchase a family coat of arms, as well as one of the best houses in Stratford. He retired to his home town around 1611 and lived there until his death on April 23, 1616.

### MAJOR WORKS

Shakespeare wrote over three dozen plays, as well as sonnets and two long narrative poems. His plays are generally classified as histories, comedies, tragedies, and romances. Principal examples of each type are

Histories: *Richard II*, *Henry IV* (Parts I and II), *Richard III*. About the struggles for power in fourteenth and fifteenth century England

Comedies: *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*. About young lovers overcoming obstacles; full of clowning and mistaken identities

Tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*. About the deaths of kings and other high people, whether through error or crime

Romances: *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*. About the reuniting of separated lovers and families; full of magic and mystery

See Related Reading for works by Shakespeare specifically connected to *Romeo and Juliet*.

### CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS

In *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare creates two of literature's most famous young lovers and also examines two of his favorite themes: the struggle of these lovers against forces that seek to separate them and the difference between superficial infatuation and mature love. Here, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale*, the lovers must struggle against the opposition of their families, the most common of the many barriers to love in Shakespeare. At the same time Romeo resembles such characters as Orlando in *As You Like It*; he begins by thinking of love as a romantic game of poems and poses and learns that it is instead a relationship between fully developed persons. In different plays these same problems conclude happily or tragically, suggesting that life cannot be seen in only one way.

Shakespeare typically fills his play with a variety of memorable characters, each carefully individualized. Not only do Romeo and Juliet differ in temperament and maturity, but young men like Mercutio and Tybalt are easily distinguished, the one light and playful even at the point of death, the other tragically hostile and self-important. Old Capulet, the Nurse, and Friar Lawrence also stand out as vividly defined individuals.

If *Romeo and Juliet* is not as profound as Shakespeare's later tragedies, it is full of the sort of poetry that illuminates all his plays. Some of its lines have become familiar proverbs: "He jests at scars that never felt a wound." "What's in a name?" "Parting is such sweet sorrow." In this play Shakespeare also builds a pattern of repeated imagery that enhances the play's meaning. His "star-cross'd lovers" continually compare themselves to beautiful objects and especially bright lights in the midst of darkness as the lovers flicker their way toward their early doom.

### RELATED READING

In addition to the plays mentioned earlier, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are almost entirely devoted to variations on the subject of true and false love.

F.E. Halliday's *The Life of Shakespeare* or Marchette Chute's *Shakespeare of London* are readable biographies detailing Shakespeare's life and times, while G.B. Harrison's *Introducing Shakespeare* is an accessible general introduction. E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* explains the views of society and the universe common in that era.

*West Side Story* is a modernization of the Romeo and Juliet story set in New York. It exists as a novel, a play, and a movie.

*Tristan and Iseult* is one of world literature's first versions of the "doomed lovers" story, complete with a magic love potion. It can be found in a paperback edition retold by Joseph Bedier.

# ROMEO AND JULIET

## Close Reading: Enrichment

---

Your teacher will direct you on how to answer these.

1. With your classmates, dramatise Scene 1. Pay special attention to facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language, along with enunciation of your lines.
2. Write three original metaphors on such things as morning, a friend, happiness, or any other subject of your choice. You may want to place them on a poster and illustrate them.
3. Illustrate Shakespeare's puns by drawing cartoons.
4. Research fencing and present the information orally to the class, or put on a demonstration of fencing.
5. Make a scale model of the Globe Theatre, giving special attention to the interior. Discover what you can about Elizabethan theatre.
6. Research some of the historical figures alive during Shakespeare's time; e.g. Elizabeth I, Lord Sidney, Francis Drake, Ben Johnson, etc.
7. Research Shakespeare's heroes and heroines. Who were Hamlet, Ophelia, Othello, Desdemona, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, etc.?
8. Research the fashions in clothing of Shakespeare's time. Draw poster-size sketches of costumes for some of the characters in this drama, or make actual miniature costumes or models.
9. In a committee with your classmates, rewrite some of the dialogue between Juliet and her parents in Scene V, placing it in modern-day language. Be prepared to dramatise your re-scripted scene.
10. Write and present a newscast of the latest developments in the Capulet/Montague feud or family activities. You may want to create your own commercials appropriate to those times, as well as weather forecasts.
11. Be an on-the-spot reporter who follows the actions of Romeo Montague, and interview him as he leaves one of the scenes.
12. The tomb scene, including the deaths of the two lovers in this drama, is similar to a tomb scene in the Greek myth "Pyramus and Thisbe." Read the myth and compare the characters, actions, and results in that tomb scene to the same elements in the Shakespearean scene. Share your comparison with your class mates through an essay, or show the similarities in chart or picture form on posters. With some of your classmates, you could dramatise the myth, which is also enacted in Shakespeare's **A Midsummer Night's Dream**.
13. The musical **West Side Story**, set in New York City, is a modern version of Romeo and Juliet. Read **West Side Story**; then, in essay or chart form, illustrate the similarities and/or differences in character or plot or setting of the two dramas.