

Summary: Act 1, **scene** 1 Sampson and Gregory, two servants of the house of Capulet, stroll through the **streets** of Verona. With bawdy banter, Sampson vents his hatred of the house of Montague. The two **exchange** punning remarks about **physically** conquering Montague **men** and sexually conquering Montague women. Gregory **sees** two Montague servants approaching, and discusses with Sampson the best way to provoke them into a **fight** without **breaking** the law. Sampson bites his thumb at the Montagues—a **highly** insulting gesture. A verbal confrontation **quickly** escalates into a fight. Benvolio, a kinsman to Montague, enters and draws his sword in an **attempt** to stop the confrontation. Tybalt, a kinsman to Capulet, **sees** Benvolio's **drawn** sword and draws his own. Benvolio **explains** that he is **merely** trying to keep the peace, but Tybalt professes a hatred for **peace** as **strong** as his hatred for Montagues, and attacks. The brawl spreads. A **group** of citizens bearing clubs attempts to restore the **peace** by **beating** down the combatants. Montague and Capulet enter, and only their **wives** prevent them from attacking one another. Prince Escalus arrives and commands the **fighting** stop on penalty of torture. The Capulets and Montagues **throw** down their weapons. The Prince declares the **violence** between the two **families** has gone on for too long, and proclaims a **death** sentence **upon** anyone who disturbs the civil **peace** again. He says that he will **speak** to Capulet and Montague more **directly** on this matter; Capulet exits with him, the brawlers disperse, and Benvolio is left alone with his **uncle** and aunt, Montague and Lady Montague. Benvolio describes to Montague how the brawl started. Lady Montague asks **whether** Benvolio has seen her son, Romeo. Benvolio replies that he **earlier** saw **Romeo** pacing through a grove of sycamores **outside** the city; since Romeo **seemed** troubled, Benvolio did not **speak** to him. Concerned about their son, the Montagues tell Benvolio that **Romeo** has **often** been seen melancholy, **walking** alone **among** the sycamores. They **add** that they have tried to discover what troubles him, but have had no success. Benvolio **sees** Romeo approaching, and **promises** to find out the reason for his melancholy. The Montagues **quickly** depart. Benvolio approaches his cousin. With a **touch** of sadness, Romeo **tells** Benvolio that he is in love with Rosaline, but that she does not **return** his **feelings** and has in fact sworn to live a life of chastity. Benvolio counsels **Romeo** to forget her by gazing on other beauties, but **Romeo** contends that the woman he **loves** is the most beautiful of all. **Romeo** departs, assuring Benvolio that he **cannot** teach him to forget his love. Benvolio resolves to do just that. Read a translation of Act 1, **scene** 1 → Analysis In an opening **full** of rousing **action** that is sure to capture the audience's **attention** (and **designed** partly for that purpose), Shakespeare provides all the **background** information **needed** to understand the world of the play. In the brawl, he portrays all of the layers of Veronese society, from those lowest in power, the servants, to the Prince who occupies the **political** and **social** pinnacle. He **further** provides **excellent** characterization of Benvolio as thoughtful and fearful of the law, Tybalt as a hothead, and **Romeo** as **distracted** and lovelorn, while **showing** the **deep** and long-standing hatred between the Montagues and Capulets. At the same time, Shakespeare establishes some of the **major** themes of the play. The **opening** of **Romeo** and Juliet is a marvel of economy, descriptive power, and excitement. The origin of the brawl, rife as it is with **sexual** and **physical** bravado, introduces the important theme of masculine honor. Masculine **honor** does not function in the play as some **sort** of stoic indifference to **pain** or insult. In Verona, a man must **defend** his **honor** whenever it is transgressed against, **whether** verbally or physically. This **concept** of masculine **honor** exists through every layer of **society** in Verona, from the servants on up to the noblemen. It animates Sampson and Gregory as much as it does Tybalt. It is significant that the **fight** between the Montagues and Capulets erupts first **among** the servants. Readers of the play generally **focus** on the two great **noble** families, as they should. But do not overlook Shakespeare's inclusion of servants in the story: the perspectives of servants in **Romeo** and Juliet are **often** used to **comment** on the **actions** of their masters, and therefore, society. When servants **appear** in the play, don't just dismiss them as props **meant** to make the world of **Romeo** and Juliet look realistic. The things servants say **often** change the way we can look at the play, **showing** that while the Montagues and Capulets are gloriously tragic, they are **also** supremely privileged and stupid, since only the stupid would bring **death** upon **themselves** when there is no need for it. The prosaic **cares** of the **lower** classes display the difficulty of their lives; a difficulty that the Capulets and Montagues would not have to face were they not so blinded by **honor** and hatred.