



AN ESSAY ON ROMEO AND JULIET

By: John Masefield

The following essay is reprinted from *William Shakespeare*. John Masefield. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911.

Written. 1591-96.

Published, in a mutilated form, 1597.

Source of the Plot. The story existed in many forms, mostly Italian. [Shakespeare](#) took it from Arthur Broke's metrical version (*Romeus and Juliet*), and possibly consulted the prose version in William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*. The tale had been dramatized and performed before Arthur Broke published his poem in 1562. The play (if it existed a generation later) may have helped Shakespeare. It is now lost.

* * * * *

This play is one of the early plays, written, perhaps, before Shakespeare was thirty years old. It is much revised during the next few years; but a good deal of the early work remains. Much of the early work is in rhymed couplets. Much is in picked prose full of quibbles and mistakings of the word. Another sign of early work is the mention of the dark lady, the Rosaline of the [Comedy of Errors](#), here called by the same name, and described in similar terms: viz. a high forehead, a hard heart, a white face, big black eyes and red lips. Perhaps she appeared as one of the characters in the early drafts of the play. In the play as we have it she is only talked of as a love of Romeo's who is easily thrown aside when Juliet enters.

[Romeo and Juliet](#) differs slightly from the other plays, which deal with the treacheries caused by obsessions. The subject of this play is not so much the treachery as the obsession that causes it. The obsession is the blind and raging one of sudden, gratified youthful love. That storm



in the blood has never been so finely described. It takes sudden hold upon two young passionate natures, who have hardly met each other. It drives out instantly from Romeo a sentimental love that had made him mopish and wan. It brings to an end in two hearts, filial affection and that perhaps stronger thing, attachment to family. It makes the charming young man a frantic madman, careless of everything but his love. It makes the sweet-natured girl a deceitful, scheming liar, less frantic, but not less devoted than her lover. It results almost at once in five violent deaths, and a legacy of broken-heartedness not easily told. The only apparent good of the disease is that it destroys its victims swiftly. It may also be said of it that it teaches the old that there is something in life, some power not dreamed of in their philosophy.

Shakespeare saw the working of the fever. He also saw behind it the working of fate to avenge an obsession that had blinded the eyes of men too long. The feud of the two houses had long vexed Verona. The blood of those killed in the feud was crying out for the folly to stop, so that life might be lived. What business had sparks like Mercutio, and rebels like Tybalt, with Death? Both are life's bright fire: they ought to live. Fate seemed to plot to end the folly by letting Romeo fall in love with Juliet. Let the two houses be united by marriage, as at the end of [Richard III](#). But love is a storm, sudden love a madness, and the fire of youth a disturber of the balances. Hate and hot blood put an end to all chance of marriage. There is nothing left but the desperate way, which is yet the wise way, recommended by the one wise man in the cast. With a little patience, this way would lead the couple to happiness. Impatience, the fever in the blood that began these coils, makes the way lead them to death. Accident, or rather the possession by others of that prudence wanting in himself, keeps Romeo from the knowledge of the friar's plans. A too hasty servant tells him that Juliet is dead. He too hastily believes the news. He takes horse at once in a state of frenzy, hardly heeding what his man says. He comes to the tomb in Verona, and finds there a lover as desperate as himself. They fight there, madly. The less mad of the two is killed, the more frantic (Romeo) kills himself. The friar, coming to this death-scene, comes a moment too late. Juliet wakes from her trance a moment too late. Theirs are the only delays in this drama of fever, in which everybody

hurries so that he stumbles. Their delays are atoned for an instant later, his, by his too great haste to be gone, she by her thirst for death. The men of the watch come too late to save her. The parents learn too late that they have been blind. They have to clasp hands over dead bodies, that have missed of life through their hurry to seize it.

Romeo and Juliet tells the story of a feud greater than that of the Verona houses. There is always feud where there is not understanding. There is eternal feud between those two camps of misunderstanding, age and youth. This play, written by a young man, shows the feud from the point of view of youth. The play [*King Lear*](#) shows it from the point of view of age. This play of youth is as lovely and as feverish as love itself. Youth is bright and beautiful, like the animals. Age is too tired to care for brightness, too cold to care for beauty. The bright, beautiful creatures dash themselves to pieces against the bars of age's forging, against law, custom, duty, and those inventions of cold blood which youth thinks cold and age knows to be wise.

Man cannot quote a minute from some hour of passion when the moon shone and many nightingales were singing. He can hold out some flower that blossomed then, saying, "this scent will tell you." The beauty of this play is of that kind. The lines--

"Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black"--

and the most exquisite, unmatchable lines--

"Death, that hath suck'd the honey of thy breath,
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty:
Thou are not conquer'd: beauty's ensign yet
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,
And death's pale flag is not advanced there"--

show with what a tender beauty the great mind feels when touched.

The Nurse gives an animal comedy to some of the scenes. She is a tragical figure. She is the person to whom Juliet has to turn for help at dangerous moments. There are few things sadder than the sight of the fine soul turning to the vulgar soul in moments of need. One of the few things sadder is the sight of wisdom failing to stop tragedy, as it fails here, through hotness of the blood and unhappy chance. Some have felt that the spark, Mercutio, is drawn from Shakespeare's self. Every character in the play is drawn from Shakespeare's self. Shakespeare found Goneril and Juliet in his mind, just as he found Mercutio and Friar Laurence. If he may be identified with any of his characters, it must be with those whose wisdom is like the many-coloured wisdom that gives the plays their unity. He is in calm, wise, gentle people who speak largely, from a vision detached from the world, as Friar Laurence speaks--

"For nought so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give;
Nor aught so good, but, strain'd from that fair use,
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse:
Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied,
And vice sometimes by action dignified."

FURTHER STUDIES:

- [Romeo and Juliet: An Introduction](#) - An introduction to the play.
- [Romeo and Juliet: A Summary](#) - A summary of the plot.
- Purchase [Romeo and Juliet](#)
- Search [eBay!](#) for *SHAKESPEARE* collectibles

Back to [Romeo and Juliet](#)

[Home](#) · [Theatre Links](#) · [Monologues](#) · [One Act Plays](#) · [Bookstore](#) · © 2006 **TheatreHistory.com**

