

ROMEO AND JULIET

You already know Romeo and Juliet. Even if you've never seen a performance or read the script of Shakespeare's play, you know about the two youngsters who fell passionately in love but did not know how to cope with the hatred between their families. That hatred cost them their lives but not their love.

You've probably also heard something about the famous balcony scene - "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo," perhaps without quite getting the meaning of that line straight.

The fact is: Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" is woven into the fabric of our common knowledge. It's popular around the world and has been since it was first performed. The story of the star-crossed lovers was already old when Shakespeare adapted it from a long poem by Arthur Brooke: "The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet." But he didn't just copy it; he transformed it into something so compelling, so magical, that it has persisted through time.

Although it was written over 400 years ago, the play has a contemporary feel. That's because "Romeo and Juliet" is a story about infatuation, that special affinity that can suddenly spring to life between two people. Infatuation may be ignited by sexual desire, but there is more to it than that. It happens when two people suddenly sense this overwhelming attraction, a kind of shared identity, a feeling that the other person completes them. They want nothing more than each other's company. It is an intense situation into which all of us have fallen, sometimes several times.

That's because, while infatuation may be an electrifying experience, it is also temporary. That's actually a good thing. We couldn't stand to "live at the pitch that is near to madness" day after day. You may scoff at that thought when you are caught up in an infatuation. When you're in that special state, there is no other person, nor can there ever be. But infatuations do end, slowly or suddenly. Sometimes the most intense cases turn into the bitterest hate. If we're lucky, and the object of our infatuation is truly a life's companion, that frenzy grows into a deeper, more companionable love which makes a lifetime together possible.

Shakespeare often deals with infatuation in his plays. It is, after all, a subject we all understand. In "Much Ado About Nothing," Beatrice and Benedick are talked into an infatuation. In "Antony and Cleopatra," two middle-aged, worldly-wise people who know better, fall so deeply in love that they "kiss away kingdoms."

But it is in "Romeo and Juliet" that we meet the subject head on, at its most intense and, indeed, at its most perfect.

When the play starts, we are made aware of a long-lasting and bitter feud between the Montagues and Capulets, two powerful families in Verona. This is emphasized in the first scene, when a fight flares up between their followers. The brawl is broken up by Verona's prince who threatens death for anyone who fights again.

Immediately after, we meet young Romeo Montague, who is mooning over the lovely Rosaline, a girl who doesn't return his affection. His cousin Benvolio suggests that he can get over his love by attending a ball at the home of his family's enemy, the Capulets - a dangerous move. There Romeo may discover that Rosaline is just one of many beautiful young women. The two set out on this impulsive adventure, accompanied by the rash, hot-blooded, aptly-named Mercutio.

And at that party, the thunderbolt strikes. Romeo sees and is immediately smitten by a 14-year-old beauty named Juliet, who is as taken with him as he is with her. After they dance and part, each learns the other's identity, but their families' feud doesn't faze them. During the party, Romeo is recognized by one of the Capulets, the fiery Tybalt, who wants to start a fight right there, but is forbidden to break the rules of hospitality by the elder Capulet, Juliet's father.

Then follows the celebrated balcony scene, during which Juliet confesses to the stars her infatuation with Romeo. He overhears, reveals himself, and they declare their mutual love. When Juliet is called inside, she tells Romeo that, if his love is honorable, they will marry and she will send her nurse to him to set a time and place.

The next day, the nurse informs Romeo that he is to meet Juliet at Friar Lawrence's cell for the ceremony, and there they are wed, promising to meet later that night.

But things go awry, as they often do. Tybalt comes looking for Romeo who refuses to fight the young man who is now his kinsman. Mercutio doesn't understand Romeo's docility and offers to fight Tybalt himself. When Romeo steps in to restrain his friend, Tybalt runs Mercutio through with his sword.

As Mercutio is dying, Romeo berates himself for being the accidental cause of his friend's mortal wound. When Tybalt returns, Romeo engages him in a fight and kills him. He then leaves, overcome with remorse and with the knowledge that he must now flee Verona and be separated from Juliet.

Juliet is appalled by the news of Tybalt's death and, ever so briefly, loses faith in Romeo, but that thought quickly passes and she sends for him. They consummate their marriage in her chamber that night, but he is forced to leave Verona before dawn in order to avoid arrest.

Next, another complication - a major one. The Capulets decide to marry their young daughter to a promising young nobleman named Paris. They cannot

understand her vehement refusal, not knowing of her marriage to Romeo, and she is too frightened to tell them. When Juliet asks her nurse for counsel, she advises her to forget Romeo and marry Paris. That ends Juliet's trust in one who had been her closest confidant.

Juliet tells Friar Lawrence of her problem and he comes up with a risky plan. He will give her a sleeping potion to make it appear that she has died. After she is laid in the family vault, Romeo can return at night and the two of them may leave Verona for good. Juliet agrees but, as you can imagine, in a plan as complicated as this, things can go wrong. Terribly wrong.

The friar sent to inform Romeo of the plot doesn't get there. Instead, Romeo hears the news of Juliet's death and purchases poison from an apothecary, determined to end his life after one last sight of her.

He arrives at the tomb and, convinced of her death, takes one last kiss. He is interrupted by Paris who enters to pay his respects. The two young men fight and Paris is slain. Romeo then takes the swift-acting poison. Juliet revives only to find him dead. Friar Lawrence comes to the tomb to get his plot back on track but he is too late. He hears a noise and leaves. Juliet, left alone, takes Romeo's dagger and ends her own life.

The families are summoned to witness the tragic loss and there resolve to end their feud.

That's the story, skipping over dozens of interesting sidelights and characters. But what makes this sad story so appealing?

Well, none of us is a stranger to first love and this is one of special intensity, made even more special because it is told in magnificent poetry. The plot and characters can be so compelling; we might be unaware that we are being bewitched by Shakespeare's verbal mastery while watching the action unfold. But reading the play, we find ourselves marveling at the sheer beauty of its language. "Romeo and Juliet" is an early work: written about 1594 when Shakespeare was 30 years old. At this point in his career, he was so drenched in poetry, that he incorporates, not one, but two complete sonnets into the work.

The first is the prologue, which sets out the tale in 14 lines of iambic pentameter.

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 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.

That's an obvious place for a sonnet, before the action begins. But there is second formal sonnet, embedded in the play itself. It occurs when Romeo and Juliet first meet. You might not notice it when watching the actors, but it leaps off the printed page when you read it:

Romeo: If I profane with my unworhiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentler sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

Juliet: Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this.
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

Romeo: Have not saints lips, and holy palmers, too?

Juliet: Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

Romeo: O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do:
They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

Juliet: Saints do not not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

Romeo: Then move not while my prayers' effect I take.
(He kisses her)

Now, that's the real article, a complete Shakespearean sonnet, with an abab, cdcd, efef, gg rhyme scheme. As if reluctant to leave the form, Shakespeare adds one final quatrain at the end at the sonnet for good measure.

Romeo: Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged.

Juliet; Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

Romeo: Sin from my lips? O trespass sweetly urged!
Give me my sin again.

Juliet: You kiss by th' book.

Those two poetically-charged kisses set in motion a story that seems to inspire other story-tellers. "Romeo and Juliet" has prompted operas, ballets, movies, songs, and repeated performance by amateurs and professionals in dozens of languages all around the globe. In fact, it is so familiar and affecting

that we can be content with simply experiencing the play itself. But it's worth looking at more closely; it can give you things to think about.

One observation we might make is how all the adults in the play fail the children. The senseless feud between the Montagues and the Capulets is obvious enough, but it is interesting to note how Juliet's closest confidant, the Nurse, fails her at a crisis point: advising her to forget Romeo and go through with her parents' plan for a wedding with Paris.

Even gentle Friar Lawrence, who tries to help the youngsters, comes up with a foolhardy scheme that ultimately fails. When he hastens to the tomb to try to straighten out his botched plan, he stumbles and is frightened away by a noise.

Left to their own devices and caught in the intensity of their love, they take the only solution they can find in a hopeless situation. Their love may have been a burst of adolescent infatuation, the sort of thing that can happen to all of us. but it was right and true and that is what gives the play its power and persistence through time.

"Wherefore art thou Romeo?" Why can't you have a different name? Why am I in love with someone who is supposed to be my enemy? Why, indeed? Life doesn't always follow a logical path, one that practical folks point out to us. It may take daring and strength - and, unfortunately, sometimes foolhardiness - to follow your own heart and mind. Doing so may have fatal consequences, but it may also give you at least a glimpse of what a glorious experience life might be.