

# Reading *Romeo and Juliet*

## Summarize and Introduce It

The prologue at the beginning of the play gives readers a brief overview of what will occur in the story. This short synopsis of the plot frames the story for you. Also, become familiar with the characters

by reading through the cast list at the beginning of the play. If there is no list or if it is incomplete, try keeping your own list of characters and their roles as you read.

## Word Power

Shakespeare often used unfamiliar word order in his sentences. He most likely did this to create a rhythm or rhyming pattern. For example, Shakespeare might

have written the sentence "I wish every weekend were three days long" in one of the following arrangements.

*Every weekend were three days long, I wish.  
Three days long were every weekend, I wish.  
I wish three days long were every weekend.*

As you read, try changing the order of words in sentences you don't understand.

For example, the sentence  
*Away from light steals home my heavy son  
And private in his chamber pens himself*

Could be rearranged to read  
*My heavy son steals home away from light.  
And pens himself private in his chamber*

In addition, Shakespeare often omitted letters at the beginning or end of a word. He might have written "an" instead of

"and." Sometimes an apostrophe signals missing letters. Try adding letters to interpret the sentence below.

*And pity 'tis you liv'd at odds so long.*

The missing letter for 'tis is "it is," and the missing letter for liv'd is "lived."

## Note It

Many words and phrases in Shakespeare's plays will be unfamiliar. When this is the case, there might be footnotes at the bottom of the page that give information about specific terms, phrases, and historical references. Footnotes may be formatted differently in various texts, and some editions are more helpful than others.

Become familiar with how the text you're reading formats footnotes. Then use this information as the play is read.

A glossary of vocabulary words may be provided by the teacher or at the back of the text. Don't forget to refer to this information as well as the footnotes.

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ading *Romeo and Juliet* *continued*

## Prose Versus Poetry

Shakespeare's dialogue gives the audience clues about the social status of his characters. The language of the nobles or upper class is usually poetic. It's rhythmic, flowing, and full of imagery. When the lower-

class characters speak, their dialogue is usually in *prose* or nonpoetic structure. Their words and phrases sound more common than that of the nobles. Notice the differences in the examples below.

**Servant (lower class):** *Now I'll tell you without asking. My master is the great rich Capulet; and if you be not of the house of Montagues, I pray come and crush a cup of wine. Rest you merry!*

**Benvolio (upper class):** *At this same ancient feast of Capulet's Sups the fair Rosaline whom thou so lovest, With all the admired beauties of Verona.*

## Get the Beat

When Shakespeare wrote dialogue as poetry, he usually used *iambic pentameter*. This is a poetic pattern with a specific rhythm or beat. *Iambic* means the first syllable is unstressed and the second is

stressed. *Pentameter* means a series of five. So in iambic pentameter, there are five sets of stressed and unstressed syllables per line. Try reading the lines below, stressing the boldfaced words or syllables.

*I **know** not **how** to **tell** thee **who** I **am**.  
My **name**, dear **saint**, is **hateful** to **myself**,  
Because it **is** an **enemy** to **thee**.*

It's interesting to read iambic pentameter aloud, tapping out the beat as you read

the lines. You might also try tapping out patterns of everyday speech.

## Reading Aloud

Plays are written to be acted, not read. Reading out loud—whether with a group or alone—helps you "hear" the meaning.

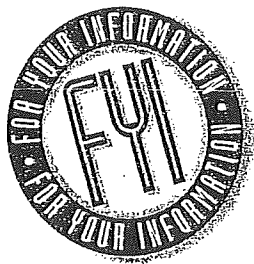
When Shakespeare is read aloud, use

punctuation marks as clues about how to read the lines. For example, the following marks can signal pauses, emotions, and voice level.

|               |               |                          |                        |                       |   |   |   |
|---------------|---------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---|---|---|
| .             | !             | ?                        | ,                      | :                     | ; | ? | ! |
| stop speaking | pause briefly | change your energy level | raise your vocal pitch | strengthen your voice |   |   |   |

Stage directions in a play also give actors tips for how to make their voices match the action. For example, if directions tell that characters are fighting, their voices will probably be raised, and their lines

will be spoken rapidly. And when stage directions suggest body movement, a character's speaking tone and rhythm should reflect these emotions.



# The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet

## BACKGROUND

### Who Were the Elizabethans?

The people of Shakespeare's day, living under the rule of Elizabeth I, were a mixed group. Some were descended from the original people of Britain, called "Celts," who now survive mainly in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Some were descended from the Romans who occupied England in the years before A.D. 399. Some had Viking ancestors (the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) who sailed from Northern Europe, and some were derived from the Norman French who arrived in 1066 under William the Conqueror. Elizabeth ruled a diverse population that had lived together for over 500 years and was developing the language that we speak today.

### Shakespeare and the Globe Theatre

Until past the mid-1500s, plays were performed wherever the actors could find an audience—in bear-baiting arenas or on makeshift platforms. Then, in 1576, James Burbage built a structure called The Theatre in a field outside London. It was the first building in England designed specifically for the presentation of plays. Soon several theaters were competing for audiences. One of the most famous was the Globe Theatre, built in 1598. Most of Shakespeare's plays were

performed there, for Shakespeare was one of its owners and an actor in its company, the King's Men. The Globe Theatre had no roof and very few seats, but it could accommodate almost 2,000 people, since most of them stood in the yard that surrounded the stage. This area was called the *pit*, and the people who stood to watch the play were called *groundlings*, who paid a penny apiece. The Globe Theatre was destroyed by fire in 1613.

### William Shakespeare, Wordsmith

Shakespeare makes great use of figurative language and imagery, particularly light images, throughout *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Watch for references to the sun, the moon, the stars, shadows, and other representations of light and dark.

### Love at First Sight

In many of his plays, Shakespeare's characters fall in love at first sight: Orlando loves Rosalind instantly in *As You Like It*; in *Measure for Measure*, when Claudio meets Isabella, he loses his heart to her. However, these are not all happy plays, and falling in love is not always a welcome event: Much of the plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* is about reluctant lovers. In the tradition of courtly love, a man might be hit with Cupid's

arrow just when he is feeling whole and free. Once struck by love, he is wounded and enslaved to the God of Love—depicted as childish, jealous, and blind.

### Vexing Verse

Most of this play is written in blank verse, a form of poetry in unrhyming lines that sounds similar to everyday speech. Sometimes a line of poetry is split between two characters. When this happens, you will notice a large indent in the second character's line. Because this tale of "star-crossed lovers" was intended to be spoken aloud, reading it aloud may be the best way to get the meaning from the written words.

Also the play includes many Elizabethan expressions, some of which are mild swear words, like *zounds*, a shortened form of "by God's wounds," and *marry*, a shortened form of "by the Virgin Mary." Some words are no longer used as they were, such as *soft*, meaning "wait a minute," and *an*, meaning "if."

