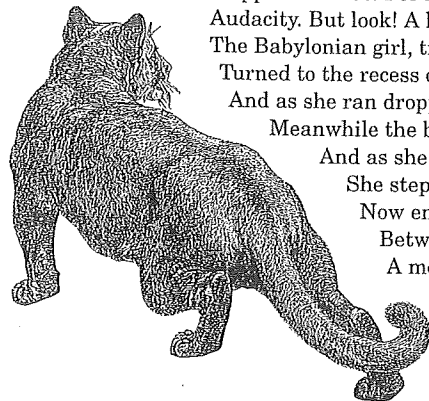


Pyramus and Thisbe

Shakespeare's plays reflect his interest in age-old stories and myths. In fact, the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* resembles a Roman myth about two young lovers, *Pyramus and Thisbe*. The version below is from *Metamorphosis*, by the Roman writer Ovid.

Pyramus and Thisbe: both the best-looking
Of young people in the East were next-door
Neighbours...
Love flourished, and if their parents had
Not come between them, then they would have shared
A happy wedding bed...
There was a fissure in the wall between
Their homes, a small, thin crevice that no one
Had seen...
And as they took their places,
Thisbe on one side, Pyramus on his,
Both waited, listening for the other's breath.
The lovers took their places at the wall
And in soft cries complained of heartless fate.
But as they talked they came to a decision:
Under the quiet darkness of the night
To glide from eyes that watched them out of doors,
To leave the town behind them...

No sooner dark than Thisbe, veiled, unseen,
Slipped out of doors, a shade among the shadows,
Ran to the tomb, and took her place beneath
The appointed tree. For love had given her
Audacity. But look! A lioness!...
The Babylonian girl, trembling yet swift,
Turned to the recess of a darkening cave,
And as she ran dropped her white cloak behind her.
Meanwhile the beast had had her fill of drinking
And as she wandered back between the trees
She stepped across the cloak that Thisbe wore,
Now empty of its mistress, worried it
Between her teeth and left it stained with blood.
A moment later Pyramus arrived
Who saw the footprints of the beast in dust;
Then turned death-pale, but when he found
The torn

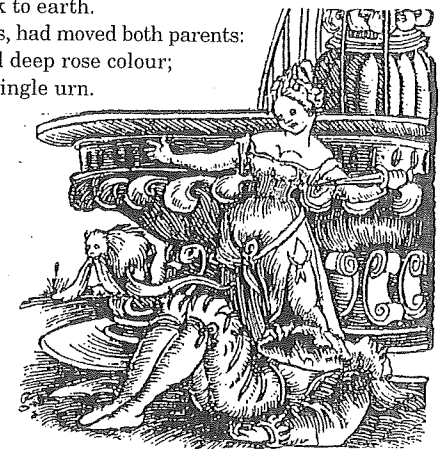


continued

Pyramus and Thisbe *continued*

Blood-tinted cloak, he said, "One night shall be
The killing of two lovers. She whom I love
Deserves the longer life; on me all guilt
Should fall, for it was I who sent her out
Through deepest night into this evil place
Where I arrived too late..."
And thrust the sword he wore into his side
Then in death's frenzy quickly drew it out,
Torn from warm flesh, and straightway fell
Backward to earth...
So his blood streamed above him to the tree,
Staining white fruit to darkest red...
Then Thisbe came from shelter, fearful, shaken,
Thinking perhaps her lover had misplaced her,
Looked for him with her eyes, her soul, her heart,
Trembling to tell him dangers she escaped.
And though she knew the landmarks, the tall tree,
She wondered at the colour of its fruit,
Doubting if it was the same tree she saw,
But when she saw it was he, her lover,
She tore her hair and clasped her arms with grief,
Then fondled him, tears poured in wounds and blood.

When she discovered her own cloak, the empty
Ivory sheath that held his sword, she said,
"By your own hand even your love has killed you,
Unlucky boy...
Only Lord Death had power to take you from me,
Yet even he cannot divorce us now."
Then Thisbe placed sword's point beneath her breast
The blade still warm with blood from her love's heart,
And leaned upon it till she sank to earth.
Her prayers had reached the gods, had moved both parents:
The ripe fruit of the tree turned deep rose colour;
And they who loved sleep in a single urn.



This drawing of Pyramus and Thisbe came from the title page of a 1521 dictionary. It was printed in a Paris shop by Ols Graf.

Romeus and Juliet

by Arthur Brookes

*Shakespeare's plot in **Romeo and Juliet** is similar to a poem by Arthur Brookes entitled "Romeus and Juliet." Brookes' poem is dated 30 years prior to the writing of **Romeo and Juliet**. In the excerpt below, the "Argument" or introduction to Brooke's poem is presented in original and modern versions.*



40

Love hath inflamed twayne by sodayn sight.
And both do graunt the thing that both desyre.
They wed in shrift by counsell of a frier.
Yong Romeus clymes fayre Juliets bower by night.
Three monthes he doth enjoy his cheefe delight.
By Tybalts rage, provoked unto yre,
He payeth death to Tybalt fro his hyre.
A banisht man he scapes by secret flight.
New mariage is offred to his wyfe:
She drinks a drinke that seemes to reve her breath.
They bury her, that sleping yet hath lyfe.
Her husband heares the tydinges of her death.
He drinks his bane and she with Romeus knyfe,
When she awakes, her selfe (alas) she sleath.

Love has inflamed two at first sight.
And both do grant the thing that both desire.
They wed in chapel by the advice of a friar.
Young Romeus climbs to Juliet's room by night.
For three months he enjoys her company.
Provoked into anger by Tybalt's rage
He kills for his pride.
Banished, he escapes by secret flight.
New marriage is proposed to his wife:
She drinks a drug that seems to take her breath.
They bury her, though sleeping she has life.
Her husband hears the news of her death.
He drinks his poison. And she with Romeus' knife,
When she awakes, alas she kills herself.

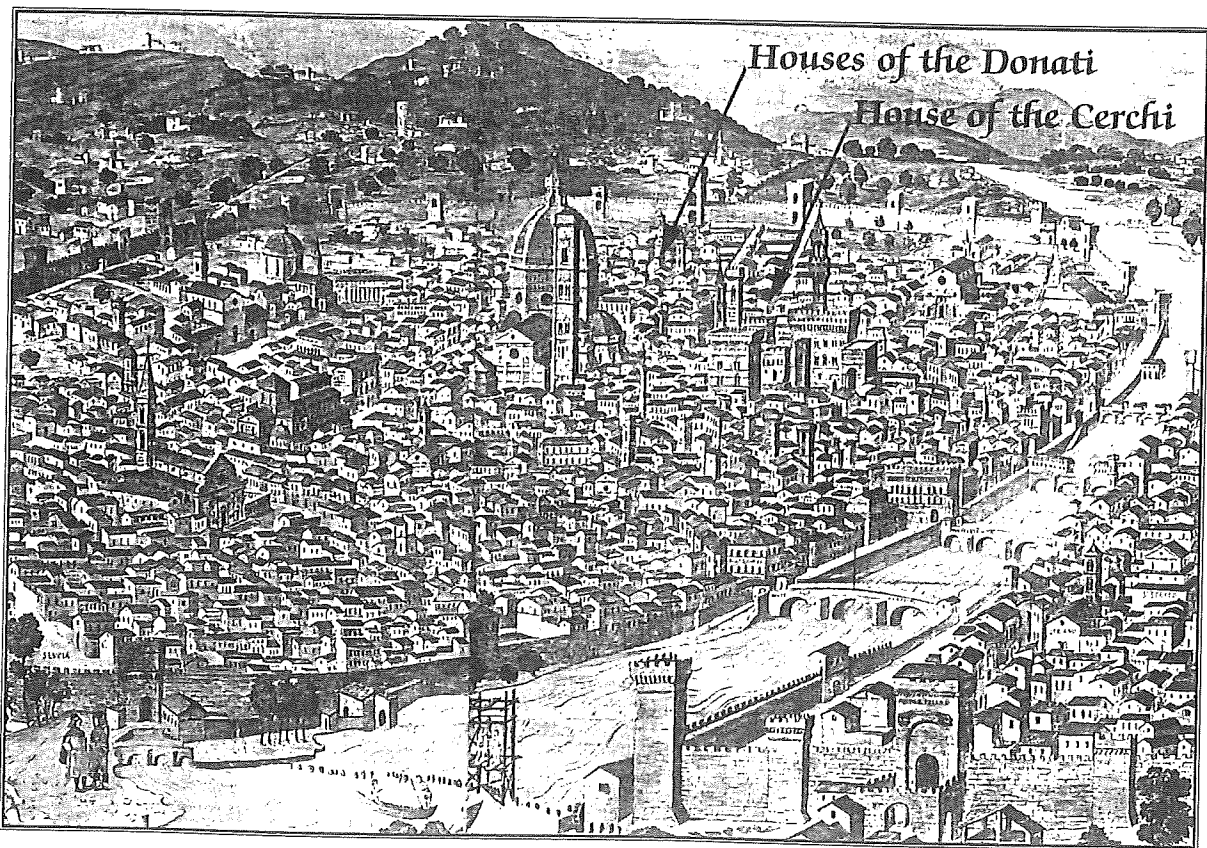
THE CERCHI and DONATI FEUD

Acts of violence were everyday occurrences in Italy during the Middle Ages. Streets were smeared with blood from riots, stabbings, and murders. Family feuds, such as the one between the Capulets and Montagues, were typical in all of Italy.

Around the year of 1300, a feud broke out between the Cerchi and Donati families in Florence. The cause was never recorded. The Cerchi headed the Ghibelline faction (Whites, who supported an Italian empire), and the Donati headed the Guelph faction (Blacks, who favored independent city-states). Fighting between families extended to friends and other citizens. Soon everyone was somehow entangled in this 50-year brawl, which split the city-state of Florence. Citizens would line up on opposite sides of the street. Then they'd meet in the middle to fight one another in the name of Cerchi or Donati.

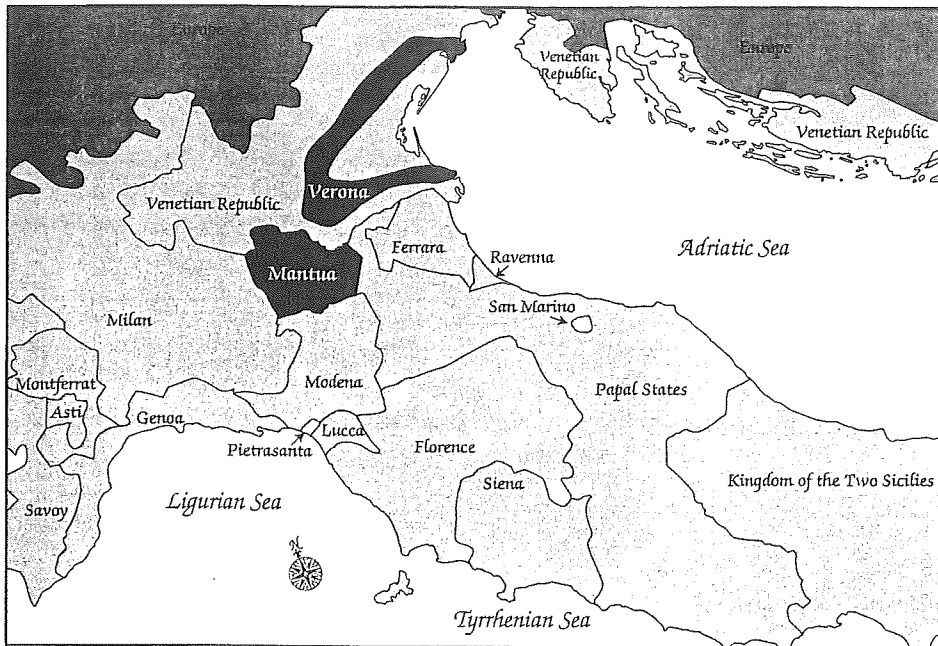
Very little is recorded about the Cerchi family, but the Donati reputation survives. The Donatis were known to be arrogant, powerful, reckless, yet courageous Florentine nobles. They were most powerful during the late 1200s and 1300s, when Corso Donati ruled Florence. However, he became obsessed with losing power and grew suspicious of nearly everyone. Consequently, he started fighting with members of his own class. In 1299, he was banished from the city for disregarding the laws of the city-state. But he broke his banishment and forced his way back into the city. Then he ransacked his enemies' houses, freed his supporters from prisons, and set up his own government. His reign was brief, as his quick temper and irrational behavior turned his supporters, or Guelphs, against him. Eventually, he was killed in a second attempt to cause rebellion.

This map of Florence at the end of the 13th century came from *Dante-Forschungen* by Karl Witte.



VERONA IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Italian history is filled with accounts of nobles fighting one another for power and status. The following information tells of the power struggles in the city-state of Verona.



Between 1260 and 1387, there were close to 20 city-states in Italy. The city-states existed in constant power struggles with one another. Often a wall surrounded the city to protect it from enemies. Boundaries and names of city-states frequently changed, depending on who won the battle. The 15th-century pope Pius II summed it up well: "In our change-loving Italy, where nothing stands firm, and where no ancient dynasty exists, a servant can easily become a king."

Imagine living in a town or city that considers itself independent from the rest of the United States. This city would have its own set of laws, leaders, and customs. The ruler is more than likely a member of a royal family that has had control for decades. This is what Verona would have been like during Romeo and Juliet's time.

A city-state is like a small country that is independent of any other power. Many city-states were influenced by the Catholic church and the pope. Even though Verona was part of the city-state called the Venetian Republic, the city enjoyed a time of independence and grandeur from 1260 to 1387.

Power struggles between noble families were common in Italy. Prominent families competed for control by leading private armies of mercenaries and encouraging street fighting. These families often aligned themselves with one of two parties. One party was called the Ghibellines (White faction), who believed in a large Italian empire. The other was called the Guelphs (Black faction), who

favored independent city-states under the direction of the pope. Verona, like many of the Italian cities, was torn by these two factions.

The most powerful family during Verona's time of independence was the Scalinger family. The most infamous of that family was Can Grande della Scala, who supported the Ghibellines. His whole life was spent engaged in war against the Guelphs. Although brutal in battles, he filled Verona's courts with artists and writers.

Some scholars believe that Prince Escalus in *Romeo and Juliet* is based on another member of the Scala family named Bartolommeo Scala. Bartolommeo lived in Florence during the 1400s. He was an unusual ruler for his time because he valued human life and human qualities. This made him quite different from rulers like Can Grande della Scala, who was merciless to his enemies and law breakers. Shakespeare's Escalus reflects Bartolommeo's style of ruling when he spares Romeo's life.