

ACT One

SCENE I A public square in Verona.

I As the scene opens, two young Capulet servants swagger across the stage joking and bragging. When they happen to meet servants from the rival house of Montague, a quarrel begins that grows into an ugly street fight. Finally the ruler of Verona, Prince Escalus, appears. He is angry about the violence in his city and warns that the next offenders will receive the death penalty. The crowd fades away and the stage is set for the entrance of Romeo, heir of the Montague family. Romeo, lovesick and miserable, can talk of nothing but his love for Rosaline and her cruelty in refusing to love him back.

[Enter Sampson and Gregory, servants of the house of Capulet, armed with swords and bucklers (shields).]

Sampson. Gregory, on my word, we'll not carry coals.

Gregory. No, for then we should be colliers.

Sampson. I mean, an we be in choler, we'll draw.

Gregory. Ay, while you live, draw your neck out of collar.

Sampson. I strike quickly, being moved.

Gregory. But thou art not quickly moved to strike.

Sampson. A dog of the house of Montague moves me.

Gregory. To move is to stir, and to be valiant is to stand. Therefore, if thou art moved, thou runnest away.

Sampson. A dog of that house shall move me to stand I will take the wall of any man or maid of Montague's.

Gregory. That shows thee a weak slave, for the weakest goes to the wall.

Sampson. 'Tis true; and therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall. Therefore push I will Montague's men from the wall and thrust his maids to the wall.

Gregory. The quarrel is between our masters and us their men.

1-5 we'll not carry coals: We won't stand to be insulted. (Those involved in the dirty work of hauling coal were often the targets of jokes and insults.) Here the comic characters Gregory and Sampson are bragging about how brave they are. Their boasts include several bad jokes based on words that sound alike: **collier** means "coal dealer"; **in choler** means "angry"; **collar** refers to a hangman's noose.

13 take the wall: walk nearest to the wall. People of higher rank had the privilege of walking closer to the wall, to avoid any water or garbage that might be in the street. What claim is Sampson making about himself and anyone from the rival house of Montague?

17-28 Sampson's tough talk includes boasts about his ability to overpower women.

Sampson. 'Tis all one. I will show myself a tyrant.
 When I have fought with the men, I will be cruel
 25 with the maids: I will cut off their heads.

Gregory. The heads of the maids?

Sampson. Ay, the heads of the maids, or their
 maidenheads. Take it in what sense thou wilt.

Gregory. They must take it in sense that feel it.

30 Sampson. Me they shall feel while I am able to stand;
 and 'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh.

Gregory. 'Tis well thou art not fish; if thou hadst, thou
 hadst been poor-John. Draw thy tool! Here comes
 two of the house of Montagues.

[Enter Abram and Balthasar, servants to the Montagues.]

35 Sampson. My naked weapon is out. Quarrel! I will
 back thee.

Gregory. How? turn thy back and run?

Sampson. Fear me not.

Gregory. No, marry. I fear thee!

40 Sampson. Let us take the law of our sides; let them
 begin.

Gregory. I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it
 as they list.

Sampson. Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at
 45 them; which is disgrace to them, if they bear it.

Abram. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

Sampson. I do bite my thumb, sir.

Abram. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

Sampson. [Aside to Gregory] Is the law of our side if
 50 I say ay?

Gregory. [Aside to Sampson] No.

Sampson. No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir;
 but I bite my thumb, sir.

Gregory. Do you quarrel, sir?

55 Abram. Quarrel, sir? No, sir.

Sampson. But if you do, sir, I am for you. I serve as good
 a man as you.

Abram. No better.

Sampson. Well, sir.

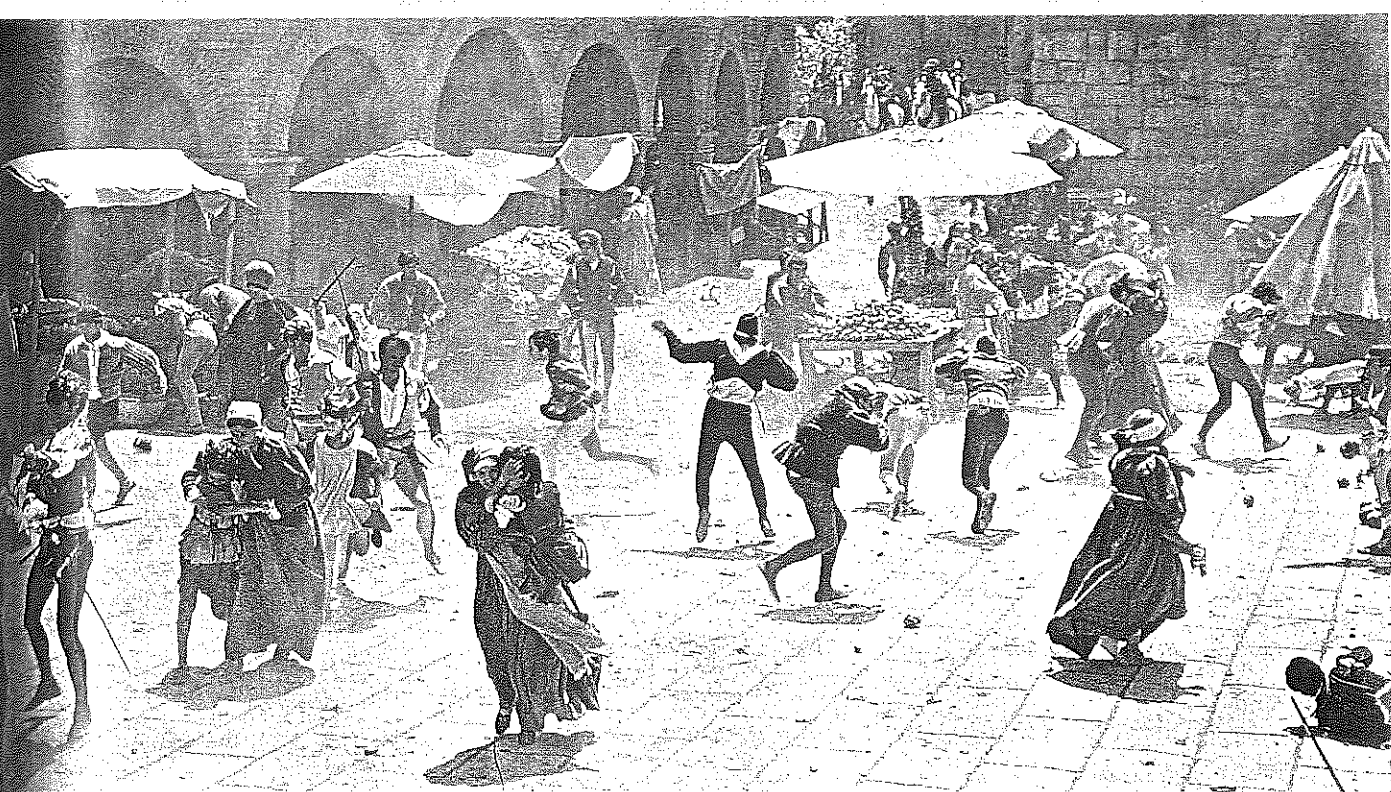
33 poor-John: a salted fish, considered fit only for poor people to eat.

35 During the next few speeches in this comic scene, watch what happens when the foolish, boastful servants actually meet their rivals face to face.

39 marry: a short form of "by the Virgin Mary" and so a mild swear word.

40-51 Gregory and Sampson decide to pick a fight by insulting the Montague servants with a rude gesture (**bite my thumb**). To appreciate the humor in this scene, think about what the servants say openly, what they say in asides, and what they actually do

49 Aside: privately, in a way that keeps the other characters from hearing what is said. Think of it as a whisper that the audience happens to overhear.



Act One, Scene 1. A fight breaks out among members of both families. (Zeffirelli, 1968)

[Enter Benvolio, *nephew of Montague and first cousin of Romeo.*]

60 **Gregory.** [Aside to Sampson] Say “better.” Here comes one of my master’s kinsmen.

Sampson. Yes, better, sir.

Abram. You lie.

65 **Sampson.** Draw, if you be men. Gregory, remember thy swashing blow.

[*They fight.*]

Benvolio. Part, fools! [*Beats down their swords.*] Put up your swords. You know not what you do.

[*Enter Tybalt, hot-headed nephew of Lady Capulet and first cousin of Juliet.*]

Tybalt. What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds? Turn thee, Benvolio! look upon thy death.

70 **Benvolio.** I do but keep the peace. Put up thy sword, Or manage it to part these men with me.

Tybalt. What, drawn, and talk of peace? I hate the word As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee. Have at thee, coward!

[*They fight.*]

60–65 From the corner of his eye, Gregory can see Tybalt, a Capulet, arriving on the scene. With help on the way, his interest in fighting suddenly returns. He reminds Sampson to use **swashing**, or smashing, blows.

66 As you read the next few lines, think about the different attitudes shown by Benvolio and Tybalt. How would you describe the contrast between them?

68–74 Tybalt misunderstands that Benvolio is trying to stop the fight. He challenges Benvolio.

68 **heartless hinds:** cowardly servants.

72 **drawn . . . peace:** You have your sword out, and yet you have the nerve to talk of peace?

74 **Have at thee:** Defend yourself.



[Enter several of both houses, who join the fray; then enter Citizens and Peace Officers, with clubs.]

75 **Officer.** Clubs, bills, and partisans! Strike! beat them down!

Citizens. Down with the Capulets! Down with the Montagues!

[Enter old Capulet and Lady Capulet.]

Capulet. What noise is this? Give me my long sword,
80 ho!

Lady Capulet. A crutch, a crutch! Why call you for a sword?

Capulet. My sword, I say! Old Montague is come And flourishes his blade in spite of me.

[Enter old Montague and Lady Montague.]

85 **Montague.** Thou villain Capulet!—Hold me not, let me go.

Lady Montague. Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe.

[Enter Prince Escalus, with attendants. At first no one hears him.]

Prince. Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace,
90 Profaners of this neighbor-stained steel—
Will they not hear? What, ho! you men, you beasts,
That quench the fire of your pernicious rage
With purple fountains issuing from your veins!
On pain of torture, from those bloody hands
95 Throw your mistempered weapons to the ground
And hear the sentence of your moved prince.
Three civil brawls, bred of an airy word
By thee, old Capulet, and Montague,
Have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets
100 And made Verona's ancient citizens
Cast by their grave beseeming ornaments
To wield old partisans, in hands as old,
Cankered with peace, to part your cankered hate.
If ever you disturb our streets again,
105 Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace.
For this time all the rest depart away.

75 **bills and partisans:** spears.

81–88 **A crutch . . . sword:** You need a crutch more than a sword. How do the wives respond to their husbands' "fighting words"?

89–96 The Prince is furious about the street fighting caused by the feud. He commands all the men to put down their weapons and pay attention.

92 **pernicious:** destructive.

97–103 **Three . . . hate:** The Prince holds Capulet and Montague responsible for three recent street fights, probably started by an offhand remark or insult (**airy word**). He warns the old men that they will be put to death if any more fights occur.