Context

Shakespeare did not invent the story of *Romeo and Juliet*. He did not, in fact, even introduce the story into the English language. A poet named Arthur Brooks first brought the story of *Romeus and Juliet* to an English-speaking audience in a long and plodding poem that was itself not original, but rather an adaptation of adaptations that stretched across nearly a hundred years and two languages. Many of the details of Shakespeare’s plot are lifted directly from Brooks’ poem, including the meeting of Romeo and Juliet at the ball, their
secret marriage, Romeo’s fight with Tybalt, the sleeping potion, and the timing of the lover’s eventual suicides. Such appropriation of other stories is characteristic of Shakespeare, who often wrote plays based on earlier works.

Shakespeare’s use of existing material as fodder for his plays should not, however, be taken as a lack of originality. Instead, readers should note how Shakespeare crafts his sources in new ways while displaying a remarkable understanding of the literary tradition in which he is working. Shakespeare’s version of *Romeo and Juliet* is no exception. The play distinguishes itself from its predecessors in several important aspects: the subtlety and originality of its characterization (Shakespeare almost wholly created Mercutio); the intense pace of its action, which is compressed from nine months into four frenetic days; a powerful enrichment of the story’s thematic aspects; and, above all, an extraordinary use of language.

Shakespeare’s play not only bears a resemblance to the works on which it is based, it is also quite similar in plot, theme, and dramatic ending to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, told by the great Roman poet Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Shakespeare was well aware of this similarity; he includes a reference to Thisbe in *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare also includes scenes from the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in the comically awful play-within-a-play put on by Bottom and his friends in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – a play Shakespeare wrote around the same time he was composing *Romeo and Juliet*. Indeed, one can look at the play-within-a-play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as parodying the very story that Shakespeare seeks to tell in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* in full knowledge that the story he was telling was old, clichéd, and an easy target for parody. In writing *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare, then, implicitly set himself the task of telling a love story despite the considerable forces he knew were stacked against its success. Through the incomparable intensity of his language Shakespeare succeeded in this effort, writing a play that is universally accepted in Western culture as the preeminent, archetypal love story.

**Summary**

In the streets of Verona another brawl breaks out between the servants of the feuding noble families of Capulet and Montague. Benvolio, a Montague, tries to stop the fighting, but is himself embroiled when the rash Capulet, Tybalt, arrives on the scene. After citizens outraged by the constant violence beat back the warring factions, Prince Escalus, the ruler of Verona, attempts to prevent any further conflicts between the families by decreeing death for any individual who disturbs the peace in the future.

Romeo, the son of Montague, runs into his cousin Benvolio, who had earlier seen Romeo moping in a grove of sycamores. After some prodding by Benvolio, Romeo confides that he is in love with Rosaline, a woman who does not return his affections. Benvolio counsels him to forget this woman and find another, more beautiful one, but Romeo remains despondent.
Meanwhile, Paris, a kinsman of the Prince, seeks Juliet’s hand in marriage. Her father Capulet, though happy at the match, asks Paris to wait two years, since Juliet is not yet even fourteen. Capulet dispatches a servant with a list of people to invite to a masquerade and feast he traditionally holds. He invites Paris to the feast, hoping that Paris will begin to win Juliet’s heart.

Romeo and Benvolio, still discussing Rosaline, encounter the Capulet servant bearing the list of invitations. Benvolio suggests that they attend, since that will allow Romeo to compare his beloved to other beautiful women of Verona. Romeo agrees to go with Benvolio to the feast, but only because Rosaline, whose name he reads on the list, will be there.

In Capulet’s household, young Juliet talks with her mother, Lady Capulet, and her nurse about the possibility of marrying Paris. Juliet has not yet considered marriage, but agrees to look at Paris during the feast to see if she thinks she could fall in love with him.

The feast begins. A melancholy Romeo follows Benvolio and their witty friend Mercutio to Capulet’s house. Once inside, Romeo sees Juliet from a distance and instantly falls in love with her; he forgets about Rosaline completely. As Romeo watches Juliet, entranced, a young Capulet, Tybalt, recognizes him, and is enraged that a Montague would sneak into a Capulet feast. He prepares to attack, but Capulet holds him back.

Soon, Romeo speaks to Juliet, and the two experience a profound attraction. They kiss, not even knowing each other’s names. When he finds out from Juliet’s nurse that she is the daughter of Capulet – his family’s enemy – he becomes distraught. When Juliet learns that the young man she has just kissed is the son of Montague, she grows equally upset.

As Mercutio and Benvolio leave the Capulet estate, Romeo leaps over the orchard wall into the garden, unable to leave Juliet behind. From his hiding place, he sees Juliet in a window above the orchard and hears her speak his name. He calls out to her, and they exchange vows of love.

Romeo hurries to see his friend and confessor Friar Lawrence, who, though shocked at the sudden turn of Romeo’s heart, agrees to marry the young lovers in secret since he sees in their love the possibility of ending the age-old feud between Capulet and Montague. The following day, Romeo and Juliet meet at Friar Lawrence’s cell and are married. The Nurse, who is privy to the secret, procures a ladder, which Romeo will use to climb into Juliet’s window for their wedding night.

The next day, Benvolio and Mercutio encounter Tybalt – Juliet’s cousin – who, still enraged that Romeo attended Capulet’s feast, has challenged Romeo to a duel. Romeo appears. Now Tybalt’s kinsman by marriage, Romeo begs the Capulet to hold off the duel until he understands why Romeo does not want to fight. Disgusted with this plea for peace, Mercutio says that he will fight Tybalt himself. The two begin to duel. Romeo tries to stop them by leaping between the combatants. Tybalt stabs Mercutio under Romeo’s arm, and Mercutio dies. Romeo, in a rage, kills Tybalt. Romeo flees from the scene.
Soon after, the Prince declares him forever banished from Verona for his crime. Friar Lawrence arranges for Romeo to spend his wedding night with Juliet before he has to leave for Mantua the following morning.

In her room, Juliet awaits the arrival of her new husband. The Nurse enters, and, after some confusion, tells Juliet that Romeo has killed Tybalt. Distraught, Juliet suddenly finds herself married to a man who has killed her kinsman. But she resettles herself, and realizes that her duty belongs with her love: to Romeo.

Romeo sneaks into Juliet’s room that night, and at last they consummate their marriage and their love. Morning comes, and the lovers bid farewell, unsure when they will see each other again. Juliet learns that her father, affected by the recent events, now intends for her to marry Paris in just three days. Unsure of how to proceed – unable to reveal to her parents that she is married to Romeo, but unwilling to marry Paris now that she is Romeo’s wife – Juliet asks her nurse for advice. She counsels Juliet to proceed as if Romeo were dead and to marry Paris, who is a better match anyway.

Disgusted with the Nurse’s disloyalty, Juliet disregards her advice and hurries to Friar Lawrence. He concocts a plan to reunite Juliet with Romeo in Mantua. The night before her wedding to Paris, Juliet must drink a potion that will make her appear to be dead. After she is laid to rest in the family’s crypt, the Friar and Romeo will secretly retrieve her, and she will be free to live with Romeo, away from their parents’ feuding.

Juliet returns home to discover the wedding has been moved ahead one day, and she is to be married tomorrow. That night, Juliet drinks the potion, and the Nurse discovers her, apparently dead, the next morning. The Capulets grieve, and Juliet is entombed according to plan. But Friar Lawrence’s message explaining the plan to Romeo never reaches Mantua. Its bearer, Friar John, gets confined to a quarantined house. Romeo hears only that Juliet is dead.

Romeo learns only of Juliet’s death and decides to kill himself rather than live without her. He buys a vial of poison from a reluctant Apothecary, then speeds back to Verona to take his own life at Juliet’s tomb. Outside the Capulet crypt, Romeo comes upon Paris, who is scattering flowers on Juliet’s grave. They fight, and Romeo kills Paris. He enters the tomb, sees Juliet’s inanimate body, drinks the poison, and dies by her side. Just then, Friar Lawrence enters and realizes that Romeo has killed Paris and himself. At the same time, Juliet awakes. Friar Lawrence hears the coming of the watch. When Juliet refuses to leave with him, he flees alone. Juliet sees her beloved Romeo and realizes he has killed himself with poison. She kisses his poisoned lips, and when that does not kill her, buries his dagger in her chest, falling dead upon his body.

The watch arrives, followed closely by the Prince, the Capulets, and Montague. Montague declares that Lady Montague has died of grief over Romeo’s exile. Seeing their children’s bodies, Capulet and Montague agree to end their long-standing feud and to raise gold statues of their children side-by-side in a newly peaceful Verona.

Characters
Romeo
The son and heir of Montague and Lady Montague. A young man of about sixteen, Romeo is handsome, intelligent, and sensitive. Though impulsive and immature, his idealism and passion make him an extremely likable character. He lives in the middle of a violent feud between his family and the Capulets, but he is not at all interested in violence. His only interest is love. At the beginning of the play he is madly in love with a woman named Rosaline, but the instant he lays eyes on Juliet, he falls in love with her and forgets Rosaline.

Thus, Shakespeare gives us every reason to question how real Romeo’s new love is, but Romeo goes to extremes to prove the seriousness of his feelings. He secretly marries Juliet, the daughter of his father’s worst enemy; he happily takes abuse from Tybalt; and he would rather die than live without his beloved. Romeo is also an affectionate and devoted friend to his relative Benvolio, Mercutio, and Friar Lawrence.

Juliet
The daughter of Capulet and Lady Capulet. A beautiful thirteen-year-old girl, Juliet begins the play as a naïve child who has thought little about love and marriage, but she grows up quickly upon falling in love with Romeo, the son of her family’s great enemy. Because she is a girl in an aristocratic family, she has none of the freedom Romeo has to roam around the city, climb over walls in the middle of the night, or get into swordfights.

Nevertheless, she shows amazing courage in trusting her entire life and future to Romeo, even refusing to believe the worst reports about him after he gets involved in a fight with her cousin. Juliet’s closest friend and confidant is her nurse, though she’s willing to shut the Nurse out of her life the moment the Nurse turns against Romeo.

Friar Lawrence
A Franciscan friar, friend to both Romeo and Juliet. Kind, civic-minded, a proponent of moderation, and always ready with a plan, Friar Lawrence secretly marries the impassioned lovers in hopes that the union might eventually bring peace to Verona. As well as being a Catholic holy man, Friar Lawrence is also an expert in the use of seemingly mystical potions and herbs.

Mercutio
A kinsman to the Prince, and Romeo’s close friend. One of the most extraordinary characters in all of Shakespeare’s plays, Mercutio overflows with imagination, wit, and, at times, a strange, biting satire and brooding fervour. Mercutio loves wordplay, especially sexual double entendres. He can be quite hot-headed, and hates people who are affected, pretentious, or obsessed with the latest fashions. He finds Romeo’s romanticized ideas about love tiresome, and tries to convince Romeo to view love as a simple matter of sexual appetite.

The Nurse
Juliet’s nurse, the woman who breast-fed Juliet when she was a baby and has cared for Juliet her entire life. A vulgar, long-winded, and sentimental character, the Nurse provides comic relief with her frequently inappropriate remarks and speeches. But, until a disagreement near the play’s end, the Nurse is Juliet’s faithful confidante and loyal
intermediary in Juliet’s affair with Romeo. She provides a contrast with Juliet, given that her view of love is earthy and sexual, whereas Juliet is idealistic and intense. The Nurse believes in love and wants Juliet to have a nice-looking husband, but the idea that Juliet would want to sacrifice herself for love is incomprehensible to her.

Tybalt
A Capulet, Juliet’s cousin on her mother’s side. Vain, fashionable, supremely aware of courtesy and the lack of it, he becomes aggressive, violent, and quick to draw his sword when he feels his pride has been injured. Once drawn, his sword is something to be feared. He loathes Montagues.

Capulet
The patriarch of the Capulet family, father of Juliet, husband of Lady Capulet, and enemy, for unexplained reasons, of Montague. He truly loves his daughter, though he is not well acquainted with Juliet’s thoughts or feelings, and seems to think that what is best for her is a ‘good’ match with Paris. Often prudent, he commands respect and propriety, but he is liable to fly into a rage when either is lacking.

Lady Capulet
Juliet’s mother, Capulet’s wife. A woman who herself married young (by her own estimation she gave birth to Juliet at close to the age of fourteen), she is eager to see her daughter marry Paris. She is an ineffectual mother, relying on the Nurse for moral and pragmatic support.

Montague
Romeo’s father, the patriarch of the Montague clan and bitter enemy of Capulet. At the beginning of the play, he is chiefly concerned about Romeo’s melancholy.

Lady Montague
Romeo’s mother, Montague’s wife. She dies of grief after Romeo is exiled from Verona.

Paris
A kinsman of the Prince, and the suitor of Juliet most preferred by Capulet. Once Capulet has promised him he can marry Juliet, he behaves very presumptuous toward her, acting as if they are already married.

Benvolio
Montague’s nephew, Romeo’s cousin and thoughtful friend, he makes a genuine effort to defuse violent scenes in public places, though Mercutio accuses him of having a nasty temper in private. He spends most of the play trying to help Romeo get his mind off Rosaline, even after Romeo has fallen in love with Juliet.

Prince Escalus
The Prince of Verona. A kinsman of Mercutio and Paris. As the seat of political power in Verona, he is concerned about maintaining the public peace at all costs.
**Friar John**  
A Franciscan friar charged by Friar Lawrence with taking the news of Juliet’s false death to Romeo in Mantua. Friar John is held up in a quarantined house, and the message never reaches Romeo.

**Balthasar**  
Romeo’s dedicated servant, who brings Romeo the news of Juliet’s death, unaware that her death is a ruse.

**Sampson & Gregory**  
Two servants of the house of Capulet, who, like their master, hate the Montagues. At the outset of the play, they successfully provoke some Montague men into a fight.

**Abram**  
Montague’s servant, who fights with Sampson and Gregory in the first scene of the play.

**The Apothecary**  
An apothecary in Mantua. Had he been wealthier, he might have been able to afford to value his morals more than money, and refused to sell poison to Romeo.

**Peter**  
A Capulet servant who invites guests to Capulet’s feast and escorts the Nurse to meet with Romeo. He is illiterate, and a bad singer.

**Rosaline**  
The woman with whom Romeo is infatuated at the beginning of the play. Rosaline never appears onstage, but it is said by other characters that she is very beautiful and has sworn to live a life of chastity.

**The Chorus**  
The Chorus is a single character who, as developed in Greek drama, functions as a narrator offering commentary on the play’s plot and themes.

**Themes and Symbols**

**Themes**
1. The Forcefulness of Love
2. Love as a Cause of Violence
3. The Individual Versus Society
4. The Inevitability of Fate

**Symbols**
1. Poison
2. Thumb-biting
3. Queen Mab
Important Quotations Explained

1. 

*But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?*

*It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.*

*Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,*

*Who is already sick and pale with grief*

*That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she. . . .*

*The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars*

*As daylight doth a lamp; her eye in heaven Would through the airy region stream so bright That birds would sing and think it were not night.*

Romeo speaks these lines in the so-called balcony scene, when, hiding in the Capulet orchard after the feast, he sees Juliet leaning out of a high window. Though it is late at night, Juliet’s surpassing beauty makes Romeo imagine that she is the sun, transforming the darkness into daylight.

Romeo likewise personifies the moon, calling it ‘sick and pale with grief’ at the fact that Juliet, the sun, is far brighter and more beautiful. Romeo then compares Juliet to the stars, claiming that she eclipses the stars as daylight overpowers a lamp – her eyes alone shine so bright that they will convince the birds to sing at night as if it were day.

This quotation is important because in addition to initiating one of the play’s most beautiful and famous sequences of poetry, it is a prime example of the light/dark motif that runs throughout the play. Many scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* are set either late at night or early in the morning, and Shakespeare often uses the contrast between night and day to explore opposing alternatives in a given situation.

Here, Romeo imagines Juliet transforming darkness into light; later, after their wedding night, Juliet convinces Romeo momentarily that the daylight is actually night (so that he doesn’t yet have to leave her room).