Romeo and Juliet

Critical Reading List
### Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source 1, p.3-7</th>
<th><strong>Kiernan Ryan introduces the central conventions of Shakespearean tragedy</strong></th>
<th><strong>Before you read the play. What are the hallmarks of Shakespearean tragedy? Where do we see evidence of this across the play? In what ways does ‘Romeo and Juliet’ challenge and conform to these conventions?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source 2, p.8-12</td>
<td><strong>Kim Ballard explores the relationship between prose and verse in Shakespeare’s work</strong></td>
<td><strong>Before you read the play. What are the implications of Shakespeare choosing to move between prose and verse in his writing? How does he use it to add to our understanding of characters and scenes?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 3, p.13-15</td>
<td><strong>Will Tosh explores the importance of friendship across Shakespeare’s works</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alongside Act 1 Scene 4. Is Romeo’s friendship with Benvolio and Mercutio a force for good or bad? Are these friendships made stronger or weaker over the course of the play?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 4, p.16-18</td>
<td><strong>Penny Gay traces the eloquence of Juliet’s character throughout the play</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alongside Act 1 Scene 3 and Act 1 Scene 5. What is the impact of meeting Romeo? How are the repercussions of these meeting felt in Juliet’s subsequent behaviour and language?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 5, p.19-22</td>
<td><strong>Michael Donkor considers the presentation of the eponymous characters in a key scene</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alongside Act 2 Scene 2 (the focal point of the essay) as well as Act 1 Scene 5 and Act 3 Scene 5 to chart the progression of Romeo and Juliet’s relationship and synchronicity.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 6, p.23-25</td>
<td><strong>Eris Rasmussen discusses the role of marriage and courtship in Elizabethan England</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alongside Act 2 Scene 3 and Act 2 Scene 5. How are the audience supposed to view Romeo and Juliet’s marriage? What is the significance of the Friar’s role?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 7, p.26-28</td>
<td><strong>Andrew Dickson considers the contextual significance of violence both Italy and in Elizabethan London</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alongside Act 3 Scene 1. In what way does the violent behaviour of the characters reflect the attitudes of the time? In what ways can it be seen to speak to our time?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 8, p.29-32</td>
<td><strong>Emma Torrance analyses the significance of Mercutio, Tybalt and Benvolio’s characters</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alongside Act 3 Scene 1. How do these characters contribute to this crucial scene? How do they contribute to the play’s turning point? How are they symbolically and structurally significant?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 9, p.33-36</td>
<td><strong>Clare McManus analyses female roles and womanhood across a number of Shakespeare’s plays</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alongside Act 3 Scene 5. What do the 3 female roles in the play suggest about womanhood? What kind of attitudes to woman are seen from both the male and female characters in the play?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 10, p.37-42</td>
<td><strong>Kim Ballard explores the presentation of daughters across a number of Shakespeare’s plays</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alongside Act 1 Scene 3 and Act 3 Scene 5. What tropes do you notice across the different Shakespearean daughters? How does Juliet come to fulfil both roles over the course of the play?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 11, p.43-45</td>
<td><strong>Noah Berlatsky evaluates the assertion that Romeo and Juliet’s childishness is to blame for the tragedy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alongside Act 5 Scene 3. Are Romeo and Juliet to blame for their tragic ending? To what extent does their age play a factor in their eventual downfall?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source 12, p.46-52</td>
<td><strong>Laura Hammond considers whether film adaptations enhance or diminish the play’s significance</strong></td>
<td><strong>After you’ve finished reading the play. Consider watching a range of modern and traditional adaptations. How have the directors/actors used the original source material alongside their unique interpretation of the characters?</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Despite their dazzling diversity, the tragedies of Shakespeare gain their enduring power from a shared dramatic vision, argues Kiernan Ryan.

When we think about Shakespearean tragedy, the plays we usually have in mind are Titus Andronicus, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus. That core list of nine can be expanded to twelve, however, if we include the history plays Richard III and Richard II, both of which were also billed as tragedies in Shakespeare’s day, and Timon of Athens, whose claim to inclusion is more questionable, but which is listed as one of the tragedies on the contents page (the ‘Catalogue’) of the 1623 First Folio. So, for that matter, is Cymbeline, though no one could make a credible case for its belonging there, when it plainly belongs with the late romances — Pericles, The Winter’s Tale and The Tempest — with which it’s long been grouped. Troilus and Cressida, on the other hand, despite being advertised in an earlier edition as a first-rate comedy, is also entitled a tragedy in the First Folio, but not listed at all in the Catalogue and placed ambiguously — as befits its unclassifiable nature — between the histories and the tragedies.

The more one ponders the question of what qualifies as a Shakespearean tragedy, the more complicated it can become. So modern studies of Shakespeare’s tragedies tend to focus on the plays whose right to the title is undisputed, and treat each one separately as a self-contained tragedy, leaving the question of what unites them unaddressed or unresolved. There’s a lot to be said for approaching each tragedy first and foremost as a unique work of dramatic art in its own right. And the temptation to boil them all down to the same generic formula should obviously be resisted. But it would be equally misguided to rule out the possibility of identifying what the tragedies have in common without dissolving the differences between them. For that would mean denying the strong sense most people have, when watching or reading these plays, that there’s something distinctively Shakespearean about their tragic vision that sets them apart from other kinds of tragedy.

So what is it that stamps a play as the kind of tragedy that merits the term ‘Shakespearean’? The detailed answer that question demands is beyond the scope of this brief introduction. But the basic points of the argument it would entail can be outlined here, and my articles on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth should go some way towards fleshing them out.

The key point should become clear if we turn to one of Shakespeare’s earliest tragedies, Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare’s immortal couple have become a global byword for lovers driven unjustly to their doom because they belong to warring factions that refuse to tolerate their love. During the last four centuries the play has inspired countless adaptations and offshoots on stage and screen, as well as operas, symphonies, fiction, poetry and paintings. But Romeo and Juliet couldn’t have acquired its enduring resonance, if the significance and value of the tragedy were trapped in the time when Shakespeare wrote it. If the play made sense and mattered only in terms of that time, it wouldn’t be able to reach across the centuries and speak with such urgency to so many different cultures now. That Romeo and Juliet is rooted in the age of Shakespeare, and can’t be fully understood...
without some knowledge of the world it sprang from, hardly needs demonstrating. But no
critical account or production can do justice to *Romeo and Juliet*, if it’s not alert to the ways
in which it was far ahead of Shakespeare’s time and is still far ahead of ours too.

Coleridge was the first critic to grasp, over 200 years ago, this crucial characteristic of
Shakespeare’s greatest plays. Shakespeare ‘writes not for past ages,’ observes Coleridge,
‘but for that in which he lives, and that which is to follow. It is natural that he should
conform to the circumstances of his day, but a true genius will stand independent of those
circumstances.’ ‘It is a poor compliment to a poet’, Coleridge remarks with Shakespeare in
mind, ‘to tell him that he has only the qualifications of an historian.’ And what enables
Shakespeare’s drama to stand independent of the historical circumstances to which it
otherwise conforms is what Coleridge calls its ‘prophetic’ quality, its dream of ‘that which is
to follow’. While he ‘registers what is past’ in his plays, Shakespeare also ‘projects the future
in a wonderful degree’, and thus ‘shakes off the iron bondage of space and time’, as
Coleridge superbly puts it.

‘My bounty is as boundless as the sea’

It’s hard to think of a Shakespearean tragedy that illustrates Coleridge’s insight more clearly
than *Romeo and Juliet*. The love that Romeo and Juliet discover may be fleeting, but it’s a
new kind of love that propels them beyond the horizon of Shakespeare’s world and remains
an inspiring ideal in our own. Romeo’s infatuation with Rosaline had been rightly mocked by
Mercutio as the same old Petrarchan scenario of submissive male tormented by unrequited
love for an unattainable mistress. But Mercutio’s remedy for Romeo’s clichéd quandary is
merely its inverted mirror-image, the subjugation of female to male in an aggressive act of
self-gratification: ‘If love be rough with you, be rough with love; / Prick love for pricking, and
you beat love down’ (1.4.27–28). Both scenarios lock both parties into an unequal
relationship that subordinates one of them to the will of the other. But the relationship of
Romeo and Juliet is based on reciprocity rather than subservience. As the Chorus tells us:
‘Now Romeo is beloved and loves again’ (‘loves again’ means ‘loves back in return’); they
are equally attracted to each other: ‘Alike bewitched by the charm of looks’; and, unlike
Rosaline, Juliet is ‘as much in love’ with Romeo as he is with her (2 Chorus 5–6, 11).

Romeo’s symmetrical phrasing reflects the perfect balance of attraction and power that
distinguishes their relationship: ‘One hath wounded me / That’s by me wounded’ (2.3.50–
51); ‘As mine [i.e. ‘my heart’] on hers, so hers is set on mine’ (2.3.59); ‘Her I love now / Doth
grace for grace and love for love allow; / The other did not so’ (2.3.85–87). Above all, their
love is mutually enhancing and limitless. In Juliet’s wonderful words: ‘My bounty is as
boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both
are infinite’ (2.2.133–35). Thus the tragic fate of Romeo and Juliet’s ‘true-love passion’
(2.2.104) does more than dramatize the pernicious effects of the feud that divides their
families. It’s long been recognised that the play vindicates the individual’s right to love
whoever they choose to love, unconstrained by irrational prohibitions or mindless prejudice.
But *Romeo and Juliet* goes further than that. It envisions, and finds the words to describe, a
bond of love uncontaminated by the urge to use and dominate. 400 years on, the play is as
committed as ever to showing that mutual love between equals is not just desirable but
possible by bringing it alive in the theatre or the mind’s eye of the reader.
Citizens of centuries to come

What makes the fate of Romeo and Juliet tragic, and what makes the play a Shakespearean tragedy, is the fact that they live at a time when a boundless love like theirs cannot be sustained and cannot survive, because it belongs to a future men and women are still struggling to create. Romeo and Juliet turn out to have been citizens of truly civilized centuries to come, who reveal the potential to lead more fulfilling lives than those they have been forced to lose by the barbaric age in which they are marooned.

The same strikes me as true, in one way or another, of all Shakespeare’s great tragic protagonists. They are all ‘fools of Time’ (to borrow a phrase from Sonnet 124) in the sense that they are hoodwinked by history. In spite of their capacity to embrace an entirely different destiny, they are overpowered by the constraints of the era they have the misfortune to inhabit rather than by some malign metaphysical force or some unfortunate flaw in their character. Romeo may believe himself to be the victim of ‘some consequence . . . hanging in the stars’ (2.4.107); Hamlet may wonder whether it’s ‘some vicious mole of nature’ (1.4.24) or ‘a divinity that shapes our ends’ (5.2.10); and Macbeth may blame his downfall on the ‘supernatural soliciting’ (1.3.130) of the ‘secret, black, and midnight hags’ (4.1.48) he encounters on the heath. But their real tragedy is to find themselves stranded and fated to die in a hostile, alien reality, far from the transfigured future their tragic plight foreshadows.

Think of Othello. A black man from Africa and an upper-class white woman from Venice fall in love and elope, undaunted by the hostility their interracial marriage inevitably incurs. Othello and Desdemona act, with a sublime utopian naivety the play invites us to admire, as if they already dwelt in a world of which we in the 21st century can still only dream: a world in which such marriages have the unquestioned right to be left in peace to flourish. Instead they attract, in the shape of Iago, the lethal hatred of a racially prejudiced, patriarchal society, whose foundations their love threatens to undermine. Or think of Antony and Cleopatra, that peerless ‘mutual pair’, whose passion for each other moves Antony to exclaim, as he embraces Cleopatra, ‘Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space, / Kingdoms are clay’ (1.1.33–35, 37, 40). To find ‘the nobleness of life’ (1.1.36) not in rank, power, politics or conquest, but in the intensity of their feelings for each other, is to be fatally at odds with everything Rome stands for, and with the part of themselves that can’t, in the end, resist the demands or the glamour of empire. So, like Romeo and Juliet, they are left with no option but to take their own lives in order to find forever in death the transcendent union denied them in life.

Shakespearean tragedy

It’s not difficult to see how Shakespeare’s tragedies of love – Romeo and Juliet, Othello and Antony and Cleopatra – were written from an imaginative standpoint ahead of their time. The heart-breaking conflict between what human beings need to be, deserve to be and could be, and what the time and place they live in condemn them to become, could scarcely be clearer than it is in these plays. Shakespeare makes it equally plain that there’s nothing to stop human beings putting an end to such tragedies by changing the world that produced them and changing themselves in the process. His
creation of characters who can’t come to terms with their world reveals the capacity of human beings to be radically different from the way their world expects them to be. So, although these particular characters end up defeated by the intolerable predicament in which they are trapped, the predicament itself is shown by them to be the product of a society whose authority can be resisted and contested. The way things had to be for them, as they prove at the cost of their lives, is not the way they should be, and not the way they have to go on being.

Once one understands that, it’s much easier to see what the other tragedies have in common with the tragedies of love, and what’s characteristically Shakespearean about them too. Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists, the fictional universes they inhabit, and the tragic fates that await them are amazingly diverse. But every one of his tragic protagonists is doomed by having been cast in the wrong role in the wrong place in the wrong time. Every one of them becomes a stranger in a world where they had once felt at home, and a stranger to the person that they used to be or thought they were. And in the process, every one of them reveals the potential they possess to be another kind of person in another kind of world, which they will tragically never live to see.

‘The prophetic soul / Of the wide world’

Take, for example, Hamlet: cruelly miscast as a 16th-century prince, bewildered by his inability to sweep to the revenge he has sworn to take, and so alienated from a time he perceives to be ‘out of joint’ (1.5.188) that ‘all the uses of this world’, including sovereignty itself and everything it entails, have become ‘weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable’ (1.2.133–34) to him. Or King Lear: forced to feel what the ‘Poor naked wretches’ (3.4.28) of his kingdom feel; to see the vulnerable human being – ‘unaccommodated man’ (3.4.106–7) – beneath a mad beggar’s rags and his royal robes; and to recognise the systemic injustice and inherent inhumanity of the regime over which he had presided so thoughtlessly for so long. Or Macbeth: the noble warlord who murders a fellow human being for his crown, is tortured by guilt as a consequence, and winds up butchering his way to oblivion, in spite of being, as his own wife attests, ‘too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness’ (1.5.17).

Take Titus Andronicus and Coriolanus: both driven to turn in savage rage against the Rome whose martial virtues they once epitomized – Titus having realised that ‘Rome is but a wilderness of tigers’ (3.1.54) behind its civilised façade; and the killing-machine Coriolanus that ‘There is a world elsewhere’ (3.3.135), though not one in which he can escape from himself. Or Richard II: the dethroned monarch, who learns too late, like Lear, that the king was just the role he chanced to play, and who realises that without the trappings of majesty he is ‘nothing’, and might as well have been the ‘beggar’ he sometimes wishes that he was (5.5. 33, 37). Or Timon of Athens: transformed by the ingratitude of his friends into an implacable misanthrope, so disenchanted with humanity that, like Richard II, he finds fulfilment only in the annihilation death will bring: ‘My long sickness / Of health and living now begins to mend, / And nothing brings me all things’ (5.1.186–88).

When the visionary German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, ‘We children of the future, how could we be at home in this today?’, he might have been speaking for all Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, who are heroic precisely because they could never have been
at home in their today. Nor is it that surprising, since they are the creations of a dramatist
who was himself a child of the future, and who remains to this day, four centuries after his
death, ‘the prophetic soul / Of the wide world dreaming on things to come’ (Sonnet 107).
Shakespeare’s plays contain both prose and verse. Kim Ballard discusses the playwright’s selective use of blank verse, and considers several cases where the choice of prose or verse helps us understand class, character psychology and mood.

A quick flick through any edition of a Shakespeare play is a visual reminder that all his drama is written using both prose and verse. On the page, the prose runs continuously from margin to margin, while the verse is set out in narrower blocks, neatly aligned on the left (where lines all begin with capital letters), but forming a slightly ragged right-hand edge. It’s easy then to distinguish between the ‘natural’ mode of prose, where the layout is determined only by the width of the page or the change from one speaker to another, and the ‘artificial’ mode of poetry, where the length of the line is measured in some other way.

The deployment of verse and prose in the plays springs partly from the conventions of his time, but there’s a great deal we can learn about Shakespeare by looking at the way he exploits these forms to serve many dramatic purposes – to fashion psychologically interesting characters, chart relationships, support plot developments, and even explore attitudes and ideas. This article touches briefly on how and why these two forms were used in Shakespeare’s time, and takes a closer look at the specific verse form Shakespeare uses. Beyond that, a discussion of the interplay between verse and prose in just a handful of plays will hopefully give you a flavour of this important aspect of his dramatic work as a whole.

**Shakespeare’s mix of verse and prose**

A mix of these two compositional forms is unusual in much of literature, but commonplace in the plays of Shakespeare and other dramatists of his age. Although we would probably expect a modern play to be written in prose, the practice of English dramatists before Shakespeare was to write in rhyming verse. Poetry was regarded as the chief literary form, although prose was used for some types of storytelling, such as chivalric romances and travellers’ tales. (The novel as we know it didn’t emerge until the 18th century). The use of prose alongside verse was something that gradually crept into English drama towards the end of the 16th century.

Shakespeare’s early comedies make use of both prose and verse, but his first tragedy, the Roman play *Titus Andronicus*, is – according to convention – written almost entirely in verse, except for Act 4, Scene 3 when Titus has a brief exchange with a simple-minded messenger. The ‘clown’, as he is listed in the *dramatis personae*, speaks in prose, and at one point Titus, a renowned general in the Roman army, slips into this mode while talking to the clown. Shakespeare wrote *Titus Andronicus* in 1593–94. By the time he wrote his later tragedies, he was using a much greater proportion of prose, and in *Hamlet* (composed 1600–01), for example, this is used to telling effect, as you will see below.

**Shakespeare’s dramatic verse**

Shakespeare’s dramatic verse is often referred to as *blank* verse, because it doesn’t rhyme (although this is not to say that Shakespeare never makes use of rhyme). As for rhythm –
the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables — it takes the iambic pentameter pattern used so commonly in English poetry from Chaucer onwards, and illustrated below with Romeo's famous line from *Romeo and Juliet* when he sees Juliet appear at her window:

\[
\sim / \sim / \sim / \sim / \sim
\]

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? (2.2.2)

Read Romeo's question aloud, and you will be able to hear the alternation of the unstressed (\(\sim\)) and stressed syllables (/) that give the line its regular rhythm: 'de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM'. Each 'de-DUM' is a rhythmic unit, and a pentameter line consists of five such units or 'feet'. ('Pentameter' comes from the Greek for 'five measures'.) A foot can be made up of two or three syllables, and various combinations of unstressed and stressed syllables are possible. An iamb, or iambic foot — the rhythmic unit of Shakespeare's blank verse — contains two syllables, with the stress falling on the second syllable ('de-DUM').

In all speech, whether verse or prose, stressed syllables gain their prominence by having longer vowel sounds, or being articulated with greater volume or even a higher pitch than unstressed ones. Various factors determine whether or not a syllable is stressed. In words of two syllables or more — such as 'yonder' and 'window' — the stress pattern doesn't normally vary. However, monosyllabic words may be given more or less stress depending on their position or function. In Romeo's line, for example, an actor may put more emphasis on 'what' in order to express admiration at the sight of Juliet. So the distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables tends to be a matter of degree, and sometimes also a matter of choice, since actors can often adjust the amount of stress in order to make subtle changes to meaning.

Shakespeare was a master of blank verse, using its basic framework with imagination and flexibility. A well-known speech from *The Merchant of Venice* — Portia's courtroom rebuke to the merciless Shylock — is just one of the hundreds of speeches we could choose from to illustrate this:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown.  
(4.1.184–89)

The regular blank verse pattern is easy to discern in these lines, but even in this short extract there are instances of Shakespeare deviating from a strict iambic pattern. Line 186, for example, ends with two stressed syllables (forming a 'spondee' or spondaic foot) — 'twice blest' — and this serves to emphasise the double blessing that mercy brings. In line 188, the use of only two fully stressed syllables in the first part of the line highlights 'might' as another quality of mercy:
A few lines later, another adjustment to the regular rhythm also contributes effectively to Portia’s eulogy to mercy:

\[ \text{It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,} \]
\[ \text{It is an attribute to God himself …} \]

Portia, disguised as a male lawyer, speaks with considerable authority, and the parallel structure and rhythm of these two lines lend weight to her sermon-like pronouncements. Her language here is strikingly different from her earlier love scene (Act 3, Scene 2) with Bassanio and shows how Shakespeare manipulates the iambic pentameter form to suit his dramatic purpose.

Assigning verse or prose to characters

A play’s genre was one of the factors that influenced the use of prose or verse in Shakespeare’s drama, but so too were the characters and the situations they found themselves in. When earlier Elizabethan dramatists first began to use prose as well as verse in comic drama, prose was regarded as suitable for comic or low status characters, while verse was retained for those of high status. But quite early on in his career, Shakespeare began to deviate from this convention. In The Taming of the Shrew (composed 1593–94) there is a delightful moment between the two lovers, Katherina and Petruchio, once they are married and Katherine (the shrew) has finally been ‘tamed’:

\[ \text{KATHERINA} \quad \text{Husband, let’s follow, to see the end of this ado.} \]
\[ \text{PETRUCHIO} \quad \text{First kiss me, Kate, and we will.} \]
\[ \text{KATHERINA} \quad \text{What, in the midst of the street?} \]
\[ \text{PETRUCHIO} \quad \text{What, art thou ashamed of me?} \]
\[ \text{KATHERINA} \quad \text{No, sir, God forbid, but asham’d to kiss.} \]
\[ \text{PETRUCHIO} \quad \text{Why then let’s home again. Come, sirrah, let’s away.} \]
\[ \text{KATHERINE} \quad \text{Nay, I will give thee a kiss; now pray thee, love, stay.} \]

\[ \text{(They kiss)} \]
\[ \text{(5.1.142–48)} \]

Throughout their tense courtship, the couple have spoken in blank verse (as befits their high social rank), but here the relaxation into prose signals a shift in their relationship and reflects the new intimacy between them.

In a slightly later comedy, Much Ado About Nothing (probably written between 1598 and 1599), the two central characters, Beatrice and Benedick, also have a rather unorthodox courtship, based on their apparent disdain for each other. For them, Shakespeare uses
prose far more extensively, establishing them as a kind of comedy duo, notwithstanding their social status:

BENEDICK  Sweet Beatrice, wouldst thou come when I call’d thee?
BEATRICE  Yea, signior, and depart when you bid me.
BENEDICK  O, stay but till then.
BEATRICE  ‘Then’ is spoken; fare you well now. And yet ere I go, let me go with that I came, which is, with knowing what hath pass’d between you and Claudio.
BENEDICK  Only foul words – and thereupon I will kiss thee.
BEATRICE  Foul words is but foul wind, and foul wind is but foul breath, and foul breath is noisome; therefore I will depart unkiss’d.
BENEDICK  Thou hast frighted the word out of his right sense, so forcible is thy wit.

(5.2.42–56)

There is a substantial degree of prose in this play, but it was not just in comedies that Shakespeare made significant use of prose for high status characters. In Act 4, Scene 1 of the history play Henry V (1599), for example, Henry disguises himself on the night before the Battle of Agincourt in order to move among his troops, and consequently has a long and revealing conversation (in prose) with two of his soldiers, who are unaware they are speaking to the King. The scene at the end of the play when Henry courts his future wife Catherine is also written in prose, a concession perhaps to the difficulty of putting blank verse in the mouth of a French princess who has only just started to learn English. However, the scenes when Henry speaks in prose show different sides to his nature and we can reasonably suppose that Shakespeare is using the mix of verse and prose to create multi-dimensional characters rather than predictable stereotypes.

**Verse and prose in Hamlet**

In his tragedies, too, Shakespeare exploits the interplay between verse and prose, and Hamlet is a fascinating example of this. Prince Hamlet himself – forced to dissemble while he struggles with grief at the death of his father, the hasty remarriage of his mother to his father’s brother Claudius, and the secret knowledge that his father was murdered by this same brother – play-acts his way through encounters with the people close to him, often feigning madness. By employing the properties of both modes, Shakespeare is able to reveal Hamlet’s psychological complexity.

At the beginning of the play, before his visitation from his father’s ghost to tell him of his murder, Hamlet speaks in verse, but already the cracks are showing, as this extract from his first soliloquy reveals:

That it should come to this!
But two months dead, nay, not so much, not two.
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet within a month –
Let me not think on’t! Frailty, thy name is woman! –
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father’s body,
Like Niobe, all tears – why, she, even she –
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourn’d longer! – married with mine uncle,
My father’s brother …
(1.2.137–52)

Here, many lines contain more than 10 syllables, another way in which Shakespeare adapts blank verse. Dramatists and poets often allowed themselves an additional unstressed syllable at the end of a line, but lines 140 and 146 are particularly overloaded. Repetition (‘two months … within a month … A little month’, ‘she, even she’) seems to suggest Hamlet’s inability to understand his mother’s behaviour, and the long sentence beginning ‘Why, she would hang on him …’ is twice interrupted with comments of disbelief (underlined). Already, the verse seems barely able to contain Hamlet’s distress.
Shakespeare’s plays often portray intense, complicated friendships. Will Tosh considers how these reflect, and sometimes challenge, Elizabethan ideas about what it meant to be a friend.

Just friends?

For Shakespeare, the word ‘friend’ expressed a wide range of meanings. He understood friendship as we do today, to mean affectionate companionship, but just as frequently he used ‘friends’ when he meant ‘family’: in As You Like It, Rosalind defends herself from the charge of inherited treason by claiming ‘if we did derive it from our friends, / What’s that to me? My father was no traitor’ (1.3.56–57). A friend in the singular could also mean a lover, often an illicit one. Bianca, Cassio’s mistress in Othello, is shocked to be asked to copy the embroidery on a handkerchief Cassio has presented to her. ‘This is some token from a newer friend,’ she objects (3.4.176). Early modern men and women had large circles of neighbours, acquaintances, business colleagues, creditors, debtors, servants and patrons, any of whom might be classed as friends. In Julius Caesar, when Mark Antony addresses the crowd after Caesar’s shocking assassination, his opening words capture the idea that a friend was, in the broadest sense, simply one’s fellow subject: ‘Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears’ (3.2.70).

Alongside these everyday definitions, friendship also meant something very much deeper and more significant. For some, friendship was a preciously rare union of profound emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical intensity, experienced by a lucky few and impossible to resist. It’s a character in Twelfth Night who most eloquently expresses the heart-swelling potential of this kind of friendship. Antonio, the sea-captain who rescued Sebastian from shipwreck, has followed him to Illyria where he faces arrest for his former attacks on Illyrian ships. Challenged by the Duke, Antonio explains that after he saved Sebastian’s life, he also granted the younger man ‘[m]y love without retention or restraint, / All his in dedication’ (5.1.75–76). His foolhardy mission into enemy territory was ‘for his sake ... pure for his love’ (5.1.76–77), a love that the two men had cultivated for the previous three months, spent ‘day and night’ in each other’s company (91). Thinking – mistakenly – that Sebastian has forsaken him, Antonio lashes out at ‘the false cunning’ of ‘that most ingrateful boy’ (5.1.71, 80). His hurt makes it clear that false friendship is the greatest of betrayals.

Same-sex friendship and love

Ardent friendships of this kind are less familiar to us today, when we tend to understand inter-personal passion as arising out of sexual attraction. When a friendship passes a given point of intensity, we assume that the parties are no longer ‘just friends’ but have become lovers (or at the very least that they want to be lovers). Some early modern friendships undoubtedly underwent this sort of transformation too. In a period when same-sex sexual relationships were taboo, the culture and practices of friendship provided a context for same-sex lovers to articulate and explore their intimacy. Indeed, in some contexts passionate same-sex friendship was understood to stand in conflict with marriage. In The Merchant of Venice, Bassanio promises his stricken friend Antonio that although he is
‘married to a wife / Which is as dear to me as life itself’ (4.1.282–83), she is ‘not with me esteemed above thy life’ (85). Bassanio vows to ‘lose all, ay, sacrifice them all’ (4.1.286) to release Antonio. Noble sentiments, but not expressed without challenge. Bassanio’s new bride Portia is present, in disguise as a lawyer, to hear his pledge: ‘Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer,’ she mutters, under her breath (4.1.288–89).

Officially, however, friendship between adults of the same gender was supposed to be sex free, a feature that in fact raised it higher in many people’s minds than matrimony, implicated as that union was in the sin of sexuality. Many male writers held friendship between men in particular esteem. George Wither, illustrator and editor of a celebrated 17th-century collection of emblems, captured this sense of exemplarity in his image of friendship. The illustration – two male hands clasped above a single flaming heart, surrounded by a pair of conjoined rings – was accompanied by a short verse: ‘That’s friendship, and true love indeed, / That firm abides in time of need’.

The French thinker Michel de Montaigne, whose collection of essays was translated into English by Shakespeare’s contemporary John Florio in 1603, argued in ‘De l’amitie’ (‘On friendship’ or ‘On affectionate relationships’) that intense friendship between men was a passionate connection that drew its participants into an irresistible bond. Friends ‘intermix and confound themselves one in the other, with so universal a commixture that they wear out and can no more find the seam that hath conjoined them together’. Writing of his own fervent relationship with the political philosopher Étienne de la Boétie, he admitted that he didn’t fully understand the force that, ‘having seized all my will, induced the same to plunge and lose itself in his; which likewise having seized all his will, brought it to lose and plunge itself in mine.’

**Classical example**

Montaigne’s language wasn’t usually that wild. Most of his essays argued for a manner of life in which moderation was the keynote. Renaissance men like Montaigne were expected to keep their passions under control. They were advised not to give in to their bodily urges, or gluttony, or rage. But pure friendship, known as *amicitia perfecta*, was different. In its truest state, it could only be experienced at a very high temperature.

One explanation for this exception to the rule of moderation is to be found in *amicitia perfecta*’s classical origins. Anyone in the 16th and 17th centuries who received an education would have read *De amicitia* (‘On Friendship’) by the Roman politician and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 – 43 BCE), a treatise that celebrated friendship between virtuous men (those who didn’t understand Latin could read one of many English translations, including William Caxton’s of 1481). Drawing on ancient Greek sources that included Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cicero laid out a philosophy of friendship that could be condensed to a few catchy proverbs: the friend was ‘another self’, and friends shared ‘one soul in two bodies’. Elizabethan readers were taught to admire the examples of ideal friends from classical and biblical history: Damon and Pithias, Orestes and Pylades, Achilles and Patroclus, David and Jonathan.
Uncertain resolutions

All of these exemplars of perfect friends were men, and men of rank. And this is another reason why it was held to be an acceptable thing to experience friendship with passionate intensity. Friendship was defined in treatises as something that existed in its ideal form between men of similar intellect, moral courage and ethical firmness – only the male frame was believed to be capable of withstanding the rigours of such powerful emotions.

Such a misogynistic view was established by medical opinion in the 16th and 17th centuries, although Shakespeare enjoyed staging interactions in which the traditional gender and class constraints around intense emotion were challenged. Orsino, the love-sick duke in Twelfth Night, evidently believed that passionate affection was the preserve of elite men. Speaking to his page Cesario (who is, of course, the play’s heroine Viola in disguise), he explains that his devotion to the impassive Olivia is by definition a somewhat one-sided affair: ‘There is no woman’s sides / Can bide the beating of so strong a passion,’ he claims (2.4.91–92). Viola, nobly suffering her own unutterable love for Orsino, silently disproves him.

In fact, Shakespeare’s attitude to ‘perfect’ friendship in men or women was often sceptical. He had little truck with the assumption that ardent friendship was a men-only affair, creating pairs of female friends such as Rosalind and Celia (As You Like It) and Helena and Hermia (A Midsummer Night’s Dream) who are every bit as devoted as their male counterparts. But he was also a dramatist, and interested in real-world relationships that were unpredictable and fallible. In his stories, the true love of friendship didn’t always get the happy ending it deserved. Rosalind and Celia, and Helena and Hermia find their friendships tested by the competing demands of heterosexual romantic love, and in Twelfth Night, Antonio is left without the comfort of a resolution: amid the impending marriages at the play’s conclusion, his ‘desire, / More sharp than filed steel’ for Sebastian, is forgotten (3.3.4–5).
Over the course of *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet goes from being a sheltered child to a young woman passionately in love. Penny Gay considers how this transformation, and its tragic consequences, are accompanied by Juliet's development as a poet.

Juliet is the youngest leading female character in a Shakespeare play – she is just about to turn 14. Juliet is also the third-longest female role in Shakespeare; only the much more adult Cleopatra and Rosalind have more lines. A young girl barely into puberty, and yet one who, in the course of the play, takes life-changing decisions and tells the audience about them, in poetry of extraordinary eloquence. What was Shakespeare up to in presenting such a paradoxical figure?

The play’s source material, Arthur Brooke’s narrative poem *Romeus and Juliet* (1562), was in most respects followed closely by Shakespeare, but not in the matter of Juliet’s age. Brooke’s Juliet is nearly 16; Shakespeare’s is so young that her parents’ attempts to control her life are strong drivers of the play’s narrative. Her father threatens to whip her if she disobeys him (Act 3, Scene 5). She still has as a confidante the Nurse who breast-fed her. Yet her mother, her father and her suitor Paris emphasise that she is ready for an arranged marriage. ‘By my count, / I was your mother much upon these years’, says Lady Capulet (1.3.71–72). Juliet has a mere seven lines in her first scene; it is the Nurse who is talkative, emphasising for the audience exactly how young Juliet is.

**Passion lends her power**

But when she next appears, at the Capulets’ feast, an unexpected side of Juliet is revealed. When Romeo, admiring her beauty, approaches her in courtly mode (‘If I profane with my unworthiest hand …’ (1.5.92)), rather than being coy and quiet, she matches him line for line and wit for wit in a formal sonnet. In this way they jointly – and equally – declare their attraction to each other. Juliet shows herself to be a natural poet, able to play the linguistic games of which the self-consciously poetical Romeo has so far been the sole performer. Yet here is the supposedly uneducated Juliet answering him delightedly in the same idiom:

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 palmer’s kiss.  

(1.5.96–99)

That most famous Shakespearean scene, the balcony scene (Act 2, Scene 1), must have been an extraordinary surprise to the play’s first audience – not only because of its dramatic daring but because Juliet speaks again, and now with even richer eloquence. At first she seems to be talking only to herself – but we ‘overhear’ her (as Romeo does) actually arguing a complex philosophical case:

‘Tis but thy name that is my enemy.  
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.  
... What’s in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other word would smell as sweet.  

(2.1.80–81, 85–86)
Juliet displays the greater emotional realism in this famous scene of young love. Not for her Romeo’s reaching for poetical clichés, swearing by ‘yonder blessed moon’; rather, she says, do not swear. Although I joy in thee, I have no joy in this contract tonight. It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden ... (2.1.158–60)

**Juliet the poet**

In the play’s later acts, where the action turns inexorably to tragedy, Juliet is even more expressive. If the plot’s turning point is the violent deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt in Act 3, Scene 1, the play’s more astonishing central moment is Juliet’s 116 lines in Act 3, Scene 2 as she prepares for her wedding night and deals with the dreadful irony that these deaths involve her new husband. ‘Gallop apace’ is a speech of extraordinary imaginative daring: it is full of explicit physical imagery – this young virgin is no naïve innocent – and joyous sexual energy, from the beginning to the end of its astonishing 30 lines.

Is it the adrenalin of the dangerously secret marriage, the experience of sexual fulfilment, or the excitement of discovering her own intellectual and imaginative powers that fuels the rapid development of the child into the woman that we see in the second half of the play? In allowing herself to both think and speak as a poet, Juliet may be seen to be claiming a masculine role. In Act 3, Scene 5 she engages in debate, equivocating with her mother over Tybalt’s death and the proposed hasty marriage with Paris:

> I will not marry yet; and when I do, I swear
> It shall be Romeo, whom you know I hate –
> Rather than Paris. (3.5.121–23)

But her attempt to argue similarly with her father is a step too far; it denies the patriarch’s still absolute social power: ‘How, how, how, how – chopped logic? What is this?’ Old Capulet is affronted that his daughter should have a mind of her own, and his only response to her request to be heard is ‘Speak not, reply not, do not answer me ... My fingers itch’, as he threatens to beat her (3.5.149, 164).

Locked into an impossible situation, with parents who refuse to listen to her, Juliet submits to the alternative male authority represented by the Friar: that of the priest and the scientist. Typically, she doesn’t go along with his plan without verbalising at length the pros and cons (mostly cons) as she prepares to take the drug. Her poetic imagination serves her well as she imagines the horrors of waking up in a charnel-house, or perhaps not waking at all because she has been poisoned. But her courage is never in doubt, and at the end of this mighty soliloquy she utters what might be seen as a masculine gesture and turn of phrase: ‘Romeo, Romeo, Romeo! Here’s drink. I drink to thee.’ (4.3.57)

**Juliet in the theatre**

‘My dismal scene I needs must act alone’, Juliet says as she begins this last act of her story. In employing one of his favourite images – that ‘All the world’s a stage’ – Shakespeare here
reminds the audience that they are at a play, in the theatre, where nothing is really as it seems. Perhaps at this point the first audiences were subconsciously reminded of the paradox that this girl who defies her parents – and talks about it – could actually be played only by a teenage boy. (The ‘boy player’ of Juliet might have been any age from 11 to 21, as long as he could keep his voice and gait sufficiently feminine.) And perhaps this is the clue to Shakespeare’s daring in writing this eloquent role: he cannot represent the real 16th-century world on his stage because of strong religious opposition and the misogyny enshrined in English law, but he can present an alternative world, in which young women can express themselves freely and eloquently – though it does not guarantee them a happy ending.

*Romeo and Juliet* has an assured place now as a potent and familiar myth – not only on the straight stage but also in every type of adaptation – opera, ballet, musical (*West Side Story*), film – as a popular story of doomed romance. But, looking more closely at Shakespeare’s text, we might argue that the play is more interested in the impossible cultural position of the intelligent young woman, who knows what she wants and speaks of it without fear; argues for her right to it; and in so doing produces poetry that is the equal of that of any of the most passionately romantic heroes in Shakespeare.
Michael Donkor studies the characters of Romeo and Juliet in Act 2, Scene 2 of the play – otherwise known as the ‘balcony scene’.

Key quotation

**JULIET** 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy:
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? It is nor hand nor foot,
Nor arm nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call’d,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself. (2.2.38–49)

Setting the scene

Famously referred to as the ‘balcony scene’, Act 2, Scene 2 of *Romeo and Juliet* begins with Juliet standing on her bedroom balcony, talking to herself. She muses on how unfair it is that the striking gentleman she kissed moments ago is in fact Romeo Montague – a young man from the family her Capulet kin are warring with. Romeo, who has crept into the Capulet grounds in order to find Juliet, overhears her words. Stepping out of the shadows, Romeo presents himself to Juliet and the two embark on an impassioned conversation in which they try to define their feelings and profess their love for one another. Their declarations are cut short both by the fear that Romeo will be discovered and by Juliet’s Nurse insistently calling her to come back into her bedroom. Before Romeo finally leaves, Juliet steals away from the Nurse and returns to the balcony. She issues Romeo with instructions about covertly communicating with her the following day in order for them to make plans to marry.

How does Shakespeare present Juliet here?

Juliet’s portrayal in this scene feverishly wavers between different positions, reminding the audience how inexperienced and emotionally unsteady she is. Firstly, her speech – seemingly delivered in private – offers the audience access to the thinking of a young girl on the cusp of independent womanhood. In her wrestling with the thorny issue of Romeo’s identity, she repeatedly asks questions: ‘What’s Montague? ... What’s in a name?’ These disgruntled interrogatives about the inefficiencies of language and labels – a linguistic probing which connects with Romeo’s later promise to ‘tear the word’ (2.2.57) – are also assaults on social rigidity and received wisdom. These are not the words of a submissive child content to follow rules as she has been instructed. They are challenges posed by an individual developing a singular, personal way of looking at the world. They are the utterances of someone dissatisfied with the way things are.
This boldness continues throughout this almost-soliloquy, reaching its greatest intensity at the end of the speech when Juliet offers her ‘self’ to Romeo in exchange for him shedding his ‘name’. This imagined or proposed transaction is radical as it undoes all sorts of patriarchal assumptions. One of these is the idea that after marriage it was women who should lose their names. Secondly, in determinedly stating how she envisages her future, her vow here contradicts the Elizabethan expectation that fathers should ‘pilot’ the destinies of their young daughters rather than the daughters directing themselves.

However, the surprising arrival of Romeo makes Juliet momentarily retreat into a more conventional role: that of the frightened, modest female. She becomes consumed with anxiety that her ‘kinsmen’ may discover and ‘murder’ Romeo (2.2.69–70). Though concealed by the darkness of night, she claims that her cheeks ‘blush’ at the idea that Romeo heard her earlier, emotional outpouring. Equally, she is desperate for assurances about Romeo’s feelings towards her; there is an almost imploring quality to her voice when she describes how she can change her behaviour until it meets Romeo’s approval:

Or if thou thinkest I am too quickly won,
I’ll frown and be perverse, and say thee nay,
So thou wilt woo, but else not for the world. (2.295–97)

But this submissiveness is short-lived, and Juliet soon regains a sense of stridency. As the scene progresses and Romeo begins to offer Juliet oaths as a way of demonstrating his affection, Juliet controls his smooth talking. Like a much more worldly and experienced woman, one tired of hackneyed ‘chat up lines’, she interrupts and edits his words:

**ROMEO**        Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow
                  That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops—

**JULIET**       O, swear not by the moon, th’ inconstant moon,
                  That monthly changes in her circled orb,
                  Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

**ROMEO**        What shall I swear by?

**JULIET**       Do not swear at all;
                  Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
                  Which is the god of my idolatry,
                  And I’ll believe thee.

**ROMEO**        If my heart’s dear love—

**JULIET**       Well, do not swear. (2.2.107–116)
Interestingly, Juliet’s linguistic fussiness here returns us to our earlier analysis of her conceptual dissatisfaction with the limitations of language more generally.

This more controlled Juliet is the one also responsible for the sharp rebuttal to Romeo’s suggestive, saucy complaint that he leaves their encounter ‘so unsatisfied’ (2.2.125). Equally, this Juliet is keen for the relationship’s breakneck speed to be stilled, sharing the audience’s view that the pair’s love is too rash, too unadvis’d, too sudden,  
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be  
Ere one can say it lightens. (2.2.118–119)

It is also this more composed, mature Juliet who, towards the end of the extract, adopts a practical outlook in her attempt to make level-headed plans for the lovers’ next course of action.

**How does Shakespeare present Romeo here?**

Romeo’s impulsive nature is in full evidence in this exchange. The very fact of his location – Romeo has brazenly crept behind enemy lines – and his bragging that he has no fear if the Capulets ‘find him’ in their midst clearly demonstrate to the audience how Romeo’s ego is dangerously inflated by the power of love (2.2.75–78). As soon as he engages in conversation with Juliet, and in order to win her over, he immediately and without real thought about the consequences denies his lineage and heritage, instantly claiming his Montague background is now ‘hateful’ (2.2.55). Equally, in response to Juliet’s tender attempts to understand how he has trespassed into her family’s grounds, his hyperbolic declaratives and ornate comparisons are dazzlingly quick and unequivocal. For example, adopting the language of chivalric bravery and flattering of the prized lady, he claims

... there lies more peril in thine eye  
Than twenty of their swords! (2.2.71–72)

He figures his pursuit of Juliet in the language of perilous expedition, where he must adventurously scale ‘stony limits’ (2.2.67) and traverse the ‘farthest sea’ (2.2.83) in order to reach his love. But, movingly, the grandness of his self-presentation is eventually reduced by the power Juliet has over him. By the end of the scene, rather than as a heroic, questing figure, Romeo describes himself as Juliet’s pet ‘bird’ (2.2.182): a tiny toy of a thing controlled by her every whim.

**How does this presentation of Juliet and Romeo fit into the play as a whole?**

This scene compares and contrasts with the beginning of Act 3, Scene 5, which contains another anguished parting between the two lovers. As in Act 2, Scene 2, in the later scene there is a sense of negotiation, exchange and gentle conflict between Romeo and Juliet as they sleepily argue about whether or not it is daylight and if Romeo must leave Juliet’s bedroom before he is caught. In the earlier scene both characters seem to agree that linguistic signs – names, in particular – are problematic. In the famous aubade – a song
between lovers marking the dawn – of Act 3, Scene 5, the meaning of other kinds of signs –
nightingales, larks and what these might symbolise – troubles the lovers.

In Act 3, Scene 5, the pretence both lovers uphold – at different times – that it is not yet
daylight adds a note of childishness to the scene. By seemingly lying to themselves and to
each other, these characters reveal themselves to be unwilling or ill-equipped to deal with
the adult realities of their situation, and so escape into a fantastical realm where they can
control the passage of time and prolong the secrecy of night. This youthful element neatly
matches with Romeo’s impetuousness and Juliet’s greenness explored earlier.

Themes

Identity emerges as one of the key ideas in Act 2, Scene 2. As well as the discussion of
naming, the shifting characterisations of the two lovers prompt audiences to ponder who
we become when influenced by love, what we might sacrifice in order to love and how we
change ourselves in the presence of one we love.

How has this scene been interpreted?

In typically punchy style, the academic Germaine Greer has referred to Romeo as an
unsophisticated ‘dork’. In many ways, this scene provides ample evidence for this useful –
albeit unkind – assessment. Romeo’s grandiose and often clichéd expressions of his intense
feelings perhaps attest to the foolhardy nature of Romeo that Greer is getting at.

Conversely, the actress Ellie Kendrick, who played Juliet at the Globe in 2009, describes
Juliet as ‘fiercely intelligent, very spirited, a really ... mind-blowingly principled ... girl [who]
can match anyone on any image, any logic, any conversation that’s thrown at her’. Indeed,
the deftness of some of Juliet’s responses in this exchange, her burgeoning self-awareness
and analysis of the complexity of her position do make her a remarkable, singular creation;
one with perhaps more perceptiveness and insight than her older, male counterpart.
Eric Rasmussen explains the complex process of getting married in Shakespeare’s England, and the way this worked for young Will himself. He explores the tension, in Shakespeare’s plays, between the old order, in which fathers chose their daughters’ husbands, and the new order based on mutual love, but still plagued by the threat of infidelity.

In the early modern period, customs of courtship and marriage were undergoing significant shifts. Throughout the medieval period, money, class or alliance governed and regulated marriage. As Europe modernized, however, the Puritans and others began to champion the novel idea of marriages based on mutual inclination and love. Time and again Shakespeare’s plays dramatise the conflict between the old order in which fathers chose husbands for their daughters and the new order in which daughters wished to choose their own mates based on affection. A Midsummer Night’s Dream opens with Egeus demanding that his daughter Hermia either marry Demetrius, the husband he has selected for her, or be put to death; while Hermia remains steadfastly committed to Lysander, the prospective husband that she has chosen.

Given the newfound prominence of mutual attraction, lovers began to manifest concerns about the proper ways to ‘woo’ a mate. Juliet worries that Romeo, having overheard her protestations of love for him, will think she’s ‘too quickly won’ and offers to play hard to get if need be: ‘I’ll frown and be perverse and say thee nay, / So thou wilt woo.’ Indeed, since men were generally the wooers, the issue of female agency in the process was complicated, as Helena complains in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, ‘we should be wooed and were not made to woo’. In the ‘courtship’ of Beatrice and Benedick in Much Ado about Nothing, the two seem happiest when verbally sparring. As Benedick notes, ‘we are too wise to woo peaceably’.

In Shakespeare’s England, the process for getting married could be complex. A couple wishing to marry had first to obtain the blessing of the church, either by obtaining a licence to marry, or by having the ‘banns’ read – that is, announcing the couple’s names and their intent to marry – on three successive Sundays from a church pulpits in the home parishes of both parties. Couples who paid for a license and testified that there were no obstacles to their union still had to wait one month before they could be married. For some, the process was too slow. Consequentially, a culture of clandestine marriage emerged. The ‘Fleet marriage’ was so named because the Fleet prison in London offered the venue; as a prison it claimed to be independent of church marriage strictures, and rapid – or secret – marriages could be carried out. Before the custom was outlawed in 1754, tens of thousands of ‘Fleet marriages’ were solemnized.

William Shakespeare’s marriage serves as a fascinating example of an expedited wedding. In 1582, 18-year-old Will was romantically involved with Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior. Late that November, the two obtained a special license to marry, two of Anne’s neighbors paid £40 to certify that the wedding was lawful, the banns were read once, and the couple were officially wed less than two weeks after they received the licence. Their first daughter, Susanna, was born a scant six months later. The license and the certification of lawfulness represented significant financial outlay. Aside from ‘Fleet marriages,’ only the
well-to-do could be married in haste and it appears that Anne’s friends could afford to grease the skids of the Church’s bureaucracy.

Famously, Shakespeare left his ‘second best bed’ to his wife in his will. It’s not clear whether this bequest was an insult, implying Anne’s subordinate place in his affections, or a tender reminder of matrimonial bliss. In either case, the bequest needs to be seen in the somewhat complicated context of the legal doctrine of *covenant*, which declared that a property-holding woman who married became ‘covered’ by her new husband. Her identity would be merged with his, and her property would become his. Thus, even though the second-best bed may have seemed to ‘belong’ to both Anne and Will – and even though it may have been her property before the marriage – it was legally Will’s to give to his wife. A far cry, indeed, from contemporary prenuptial agreements or divorce settlements!

The phrase ‘rule of thumb’ was long thought to derive from an early English law that allowed men to discipline their wives so long as they used a stick no greater than a thumb’s-breadth. Although the story appears to be apocryphal, the theme of men having an upper hand in marriage recurs in Shakespeare, as in the title of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The titular character, Katherina, can certainly be read as an example of the stock character of a shrew, ‘a woman given to railing or scolding or other malignant or perverse behavior’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*), and certainly early modern audiences would have recognised her as such and the need to be ‘tamed’ as an obvious one. But her characterization, especially her final monologue, may destabilise the stereotype; and some scholars have argued for an ironic reading of the play as exposing rather than reinforcing sexist conventions.

Other married characters in his plays are significantly more straightforward. Some operate as relatively one-dimensional stock characters: *Much Ado about Nothing*’s Hero – beautiful, virtuous, maligned, forgiving – springs immediately to mind. Though Shakespeare valorises devotion in Hero, he elsewhere demonstrates the tragic ramifications of devotion turned to obsession. Othello’s love for Desdemona morphs into a poisonous, eventually deadly jealousy; this narrative of faithful love turned sour reappears in *Cymbeline*, albeit with a happier result. This thread of venomous jealousy exposes in turn another anxiety related to marriage: the threat of cuckoldry.

Stemming from medieval concerns about land inheritance, marital infidelity carried different stigmas depending on which partner was unfaithful. Unfaithful wives were harshly judged, while philandering men received far milder social stigma. In *A Winter’s Tale*, the jealous King Leontes suspects his wife Hermione of having an affair with his best friend Polixenes; in retaliation, Leontes sentences Hermione and her baby to be burnt to death. Interestingly, Shakespeare’s *oeuvre* includes few instances of actual infidelity; it’s more often the case that the husbands, like Leontes and Othello, who believe themselves to be cuckolded are either mistaken, misled, or insane.

Since land and property passed through the male line, the issue of an unfaithful wife’s union with another man might inherit land owned by her husband. One of the ways Richard seeks to delegitimize the claims of the young princes to the throne in *Richard III* is to suggest their bastardy. If bastards, it would follow, they ought not to inherit the throne vacated by the
death of their father, Edward IV. Richard’s claim is fabricated, but the bastardy of Don John in *Much Ado about Nothing* is an established fact. Indeed, the stage directions in the early texts refer to him as ‘John the Bastard,’ his speech prefixes are often simply ‘Bastard’. Like Hero, Don John’s character has little nuance or divergence from convention: if bastard, therefore he must be base.

The bastard Edmund in *King Lear* similarly schemes to upset the status quo but differs from Don John in his interiority: Edmund’s first soliloquy establishes him as psychologically complicated, tormented by the societal double standard which lionises his (legitimate) brother and demonises him. Though Edmund’s behavior confirms his status as a villain, he marks a significant shift away from the traditional equivalence of bastard as purely evil moral freak. Shakespeare’s plays and poems teem with unique marital – and sometimes extramarital – unions. The most well-known instance of the latter may be the legendary romance of Antony and Cleopatra, in the play of that name – though *Troilus and Cressida* takes the drama of infidelity another step by situating it in a politically-charged love triangle. Neither does Shakespeare shy away from writing villainous couples. In *Hamlet*, Claudius and Gertrude marry almost before the corpse of Old Hamlet is cold. In *King Lear*, Edmund the bastard seduces Lear’s two older daughters and pits them against each other, promising fidelity to each. And so on, and on: practically every romantic relationship in Shakespeare's work – courtships, seductions, marriages, infidelities – stands out as somehow unique, somehow innovative. Although we don’t know if Will Shakespeare’s marriage to Anne was a stormy one, it is certainly true that there are virtually no happily married couples in his plays.
**Source 7**

*Romeo and Juliet* is not only a love story. Andrew Dickson describes how the play reflects the violence and chaos of Shakespearean London – and how, more recently, directors have used it to explore conflicts of their own time.

All Shakespeare’s plays contain themes that feel universal – the father who breaks disastrously from his children, the marriage that collapses under the pressure of a husband’s jealousy. But the ingredients that make up *Romeo and Juliet* are perhaps more universal than most: young love, bitter hate, feuding communities, tragic and undeserved death. Shakespeare drew his story of a pair of star-crossed Veronese lovers from the lumbering narrative poem *Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* by the Elizabethan writer Arthur Brooke, but in reality the idea could have come from almost anywhere. The story is surely as old as love itself.[1]

**‘With great applause’**

The play’s first audiences, perhaps at the Curtain Theatre in Shoreditch, seem to have responded powerfully to this story of volatile emotions and passions lived to the extreme: the first quarto of 1597 refers to it being ‘often (with great applause) plaid publiquely’, a claim echoed by the second quarto two years later, which refers to the play being ‘sundry times publiquely acted’.

It is not hard to see why. Following Brooke, the play is set in Verona, but – as so often with Shakespeare – the streets we hear described on stage are also those of the bustling, overcrowded, pestilent, noisy and noisome city in which he lived and worked. London was a young city in the 1590s, and the crowds who took their chances with prostitutes and pickpockets in the entertainment districts were even younger; contemporary reports suggest audiences at the open-air theatres were predominantly male, and (unlike ‘private’ indoor playhouses, where admission cost at least six times as much) were drawn from all ranks of society. For this youthful, restless crowd – some of whom were bunking off work to attend – the violent skirmishes between the Capulets and Montagues that dominate the action must have been a major part of the attraction, and the swordfighting skills displayed by Shakespeare’s colleagues will have been watched with a keen eye. It is an amusing thought that for at least some of these artisans and apprentices, the lovers and their all-consuming passion might have seemed almost incidental.[2]

**‘Mad blood stirring’**

For greyer heads in the audience, the image of young men on the prowl and a city slipping into mayhem would have been only too familiar. In summer 1595, two years before that first quarto was printed and perhaps in the same year Shakespeare was writing the play, a series of riots in London over rocketing inflation caused the authorities to panic. On 29 June, a 1,000-strong army of apprentices and disaffected soldiers marched on Tower Hill; on 4 July, martial law was imposed. In the legal action that followed, the rioters were accused of intending to ‘robb, steale, pill and spoile the wealthy … and to take the sworde of auchtorthyte from the magistrats and governours lawfully aucthorised’. [3] Five were
hanged, drawn and quartered. Ever-attentive to the world around him, Shakespeare responded to this atmosphere of what Benvolio calls ‘the mad blood stirring’ (3.1.4) by putting a version of it on stage:

**GREGORY**
Draw thy tool. Here comes the House of Montagues.

**SAMSON**
My naked weapon is out. Quarrel, I will back thee.

**GREGORY**
How – turn thy back and run.

**SAMSON**
My naked weapon is out. Quarrel, I will back thee.

**SAMSON**
Let us take the law of our side. Let them begin.

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

**SAMSON**
Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them, which is a disgrace to them if they bear it.

*He bites his thumb*

**ABRAHAM**
Do you bite your thumb at us, sir? (1.1.31–42)

Audiences at early performances must have watched these exchanges with a nervous shiver, and wondered whether the couple in the play’s title would be the only ones caught up in the tragedy.

**Prague to Palestine**

And while *Romeo and Juliet* has barely been off stage or screen since – it may well be Shakespeare’s most performed and adapted play – it takes on a particular intensity in places and periods where violence is more than a mere literary device. In communist Czechoslovakia in 1963, Czech director Otomar Krejča directed it at the Prague National Theatre in a famous version that, drawing heavily upon its Cold War context, made it into a parable of disaffected youth versus negligent age (seeing it in Paris the following year, Peter Brook declared this ‘the best production of the tragedy he had ever seen’). Indeed, according to some theatre historians *Romeo and Juliet* was one of the most popular plays behind the Iron Curtain; at Moscow’s Vakhtangov Theatre in 1956, Josef Rapoport offered an image of the lovers crushed by violent social forces, an approach echoed by Tamás Major’s Hungarian production of 1971, which played the feud as an outright civil war, put down by an overbearing military regime.\(^4\)

Other conflicts have provided divisions even starker and more dramatically potent. In 1994, the Romany company Pralipe (Brotherhood), forced to perform in exile from their native Macedonia, set the play in Bosnia with a Muslim Juliet and a Christian Romeo, and closed the play not with reconciliation but spatters of gunfire.\(^5\) That same year, Palestinian and Israeli theatremakers came together to create a joint production in Jerusalem, with the Montagues as Arabs and the Capulets as Jews; the balcony scene was conducted in a mixture of Arabic and Hebrew, and the brawling families threw rocks in a deliberate echo of the intifada.\(^6\)

In India, where tensions of creed and caste are impossible to ignore, the *Romeo and Juliet* story has inspired multiple versions, notably in cinema: in 1947, the year of partition, a version starring the great Indian heroine Nargis was released (the film is now unfortunately
lost), while in 1992 an adaptation called *Henna* was a hit at the box office, featuring Zeba Bakhtiar as a Pakistani Muslim Juliet and Rishi Kapoor as her Indian Hindu lover.

More familiar to most Western audiences is the much-loved *West Side Story* (1957), which united the considerable talents of Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins and Stephen Sondheim. Set on the mean streets of New York’s Upper West Side, it portrayed the violent gang warfare between the Puerto Rican Sharks and the white Jets. That Robbins’s original concept suggested a conflict between Irish Catholic and Jewish families located in the entirely different community of the Lower East Side suggests how adaptable the story can really be.[7]

Yet if *Romeo and Juliet* can point up the multiple divisions in society, it can also – sometimes at least – attempt to heal them. In 2014, the Syrian playwright and director Nawar Bulbul, working with two groups of young people in Syria and Jordan, performed a version of the play unlike any other.[8] A 12-year-old Syrian boy played Romeo from the hospital in Amman where he’d been forced to flee; Juliet, her head covered with a veil and her identity kept secret, was in Homs. The two sets of performers – and the two sets of audience in each location – were rehearsed separately, then connected by Skype for the performance. Friar Lawrence was played by a young Muslim actor in tribute to Father Frans van der Lugt, a Jesuit priest murdered by the Assad regime. This time the play ended not with death, but in the frantic hope for something else. ‘Enough killing! Enough blood!’ Juliet’s companion cries, ‘Why are you killing us? We want to live like the rest of the world.’
Source 8

Emma Torrance analyses the characters of Benvolio, Mercutio and Tybalt within Act 3, Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet* – a key scene in which a fight breaks out between the Capulets and Montagues.

**Key quotation**

**MERCUTIO** Men’s eyes were made to look, and let them gaze;  
I will not budge for no man’s pleasure, I. (3.1.54–55)

**Setting the scene**

The fight which breaks out between the Capulets and Montagues in Act 3, Scene 1 is central to the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*: its consequences shift the story from romantic comedy to tragedy in a few short lines. The catalyst, Mercutio, is ironically a member of neither family. It is the day after the Capulet ball, and he, always ready to cause trouble, is hanging around the Verona streets with Benvolio and other Montague men. Tybalt is also out, determined to challenge Romeo to a duel. He thinks Romeo has insulted and mocked his family by disguising himself to gatecrash their ball. Tybalt wants to restore his offended honour publicly.

**How does Shakespeare present Benvolio here and in the rest of the play?**

Before Romeo’s arrival, Shakespeare presents us with a potentially explosive clash between two important characters: Mercutio and Tybalt. Between this hot-tempered pair stands level-headed Benvolio, Romeo’s cousin, a Montague and friend to Mercutio. In contrast to Mercutio, Benvolio wants to avoid confrontation. He is presented throughout the play as cautious and careful (his name, translated from Italian, means ‘good will’). Shakespeare portrays him as a go-between from the start. In the brawl opening Act 1, Scene 1, he plays the peacekeeper (‘Part fools, you know not what you do!’ (1.1.64–65)), and through these words Shakespeare establishes him as wise and cautious. These qualities are explored further in Act 3, Scene 1.

At the beginning of the scene Benvolio tries to manage Mercutio’s playful and dangerous temper. Shakespeare presents him as instinctively aware of the tension and his reasonable voice worringly foreshadows what is to come. He knows from experience how easily trouble can break out and clearly fears the consequences:

I pray thee, good Mercutio, let’s retire:  
The day is hot, the Capels are abroad,  
And if we meet we shall not scape a brawl, (3.1.1–3)

In this example Shakespeare avoids forceful language. Instead, he represents Benvolio as persuasive, encouraging Mercutio to ‘retire’ from this very public place. He focusses on the influence of the weather and the Capulets’ presence rather than his powerful friend’s wild, reckless personality. His reasoning illustrates his ability to predict Mercutio’s likely response. Shakespeare shows him deliberately placing the potential blame elsewhere to avoid incensing the unpredictable Mercutio. ‘The day is hot’ conveys the mood as electric,
dangerous and out of their control, whilst ‘the Capels are abroad’ seeks to suggest that the instigators of conflict will be Capulets. Finally, and most convincingly, Benvolio states with fatalistic certainty, ‘And if we meet we shall not scape a brawl’. Here, Shakespeare reinforces the conflict as unavoidable through Benvolio’s authoritative negative modal, ‘shall not’. However, in this well-judged warning Benvolio hints at what the audience suspects: Mercutio’s presence makes the probability of ‘scap[ing] a brawl’ unlikely. However, another important aspect of Benvolio’s character is also revealed through these lines: his loyalty. By using the collective pronouns ‘us’ (‘let’s) and ‘we’, Benvolio commits to standing by Mercutio’s side regardless of his own concerns.

In his exploration of their friendship, Shakespeare depicts them as intimate and friendly. Here, Benvolio draws on this intimacy to influence Mercutio. Despite Benvolio’s lower status, he addresses Mercutio using the informal, intimate pronoun ‘thee’. This symbolises the connection and affection between them. We might expect Benvolio to use ‘you’ – more appropriate and respectful to a social superior such as Mercutio. However, Shakespeare chooses this deliberately to demonstrate Benvolio’s diplomatic ‘good will’ and Mercutio’s relaxed attitude. At the same time, Benvolio reinforces his inferior status by pleading ‘pray’ rather than asking outright, and compliments Mercutio as ‘good’ in order to encourage sensible behaviour. Benvolio knows his influence is limited as Mercutio’s connection to the Prince gives him power and protection, allowing him to act recklessly without fear of the consequences. Shakespeare emphasises the danger of Mercutio’s unpredictable (or mercurial) personality and status through Benvolio’s deliberately tactful and diplomatic words.

How does Shakespeare present Tybalt here and in the rest of the play?

Interestingly, Shakespeare presents Tybalt as uncharacteristically wary in this scene. This is despite being established as hot-tempered and confrontational in Act 1, Scene 1’s brawl, and through his choleric rage when stopped from challenging Romeo at the ball. He now addresses Benvolio (who he earlier threatened to murder), Mercutio and the Montagues as ‘Gentlemen’ and wishes them ‘good den’ (3.1.38), both marks of polite, respectful behaviour. When speaking directly to Mercutio, Tybalt uses ‘you’ and ‘sir’ (3.1.41) to indicate Mercutio’s social superiority, taking care not to challenge or offend the Prince’s kinsman. Even when Mercutio taunts and provokes him to anger with deliberately insulting verbal attacks, Tybalt publicly backs down from the conflict to pursue Romeo (‘Well peace be with you, sir, here comes my man’ (3.1.56)).

Shakespeare presents the usually quick-tempered Tybalt as capable of both sensible and honourable behaviour: characteristics we rarely associate with him. He shows Tybalt avoiding confrontation, perhaps because of the Prince’s decree, and emphasises the importance of social hierarchy in Verona. Tybalt’s avoidance of Mercutio’s initial challenge and his determination to duel honourably with Romeo are actions which arguably follow the codes of both chivalry and honour, showing Tybalt to demonstrate better judgement than we expect.

Like the majority of Benvolio’s lines in this scene, many of Tybalt’s are written in iambic blank verse. Whilst Shakespeare often uses this technique to indicate a character’s higher
social status, he is also hinting that both men approach this conflict cautiously. This rigid structure could symbolise that they plan their speech and behaviour rather than respond impulsively. However, Tybalt does slip out of meter and drops the polite pronoun in his accusation: ‘Mercutio, thou consortest with Romeo–’ (3.1.45). Through this momentary loss of control, Shakespeare reminds us of Tybalt’s natural temperament.

**How does Shakespeare present Mercutio here and in the rest of the play?**

Mercutio is unpredictable. He starts the scene in prose and slips in and out of meter at will. Through this verbal movement Shakespeare indicates his volatile and erratic temperament; he seems impossible to define or pin down. This is what makes Mercutio such an appealing character: we cannot predict what he will do next.

His name, derived from mercury, reflects this. It symbolises his role as both a messenger, like the god Mercury, and his unpredictable instability, like the chemical element (also known as ‘quicksilver’). These qualities clearly play out in this scene. Mercutio is the messenger for the ultimate tragedy: in his final lines he repeats ‘A plague a’ both your houses!’ (3.1.99–100) as both a fatal prediction and curse. Equally, his unpredictability, volatility and impulsiveness are shown as both reckless and entertaining. His ‘quicksilver’ wit and hot-temper are highlighted through clever puns and aggressive, audacious behaviour.

Here, as in Act 1, Scene 4, Mercutio takes centre stage. He demands to be looked at:

> Men's eyes were made to look, and let them gaze;  
> I will not budge for no man's pleasure, I. (3.1.54–55)

This quotation sums Mercutio up: it conveys that he thrives on public admiration. The verb ‘gaze’ depicts the crowd as amazed, unable to look away, and implies that he imagines they see him as unique and spectacular. In many ways he is; Shakespeare wants the audience to admire and enjoy his reckless and irrepressible behaviour. Because of the clever, witty and complex speeches Shakespeare gives him, Mercutio is often the character actors want to play, despite having a relatively limited role.

In this example, Shakespeare also reveals Mercutio’s confidence, arrogance and power. He refuses to ‘budge’ and affirms forcefully his status by asserting that he ‘will not’ change or adapt to anyone, ‘for no man’s pleasure’. He behaves as if he doesn’t care what others think of him. Shakespeare repeats the pronoun ‘I’ at the beginning and end of the line to emphasise Mercutio’s show of arrogant confidence. It makes him seem egotistical and communicates his absolute refusal to back down or submit. Whilst this conforms to our expectations of Mercutio, who seems to fear nothing, we could interpret this self-importance as a necessary tactic to help protect his reputation and high status by avoiding a loss of public face.

As in earlier scenes, Shakespeare presents Mercutio as fiercely clever and humorous, despite the danger of the conflict. His brain is so swift, moving like mercury, that other characters and the audience often struggle to keep up with his endless puns and jests. Even in death he continues to play on words, ‘Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me
a grave man’ [italics my emphasis] (3.1.96–97). This double meaning of ‘grave’ characterises his role as entertainer, a quality which ensures the audience, like his friends, grieve over his death. Whilst aspects of Mercutio’s behaviour may seem arrogant, it is important to remember that he ultimately acts in defence of his friend, demonstrating courage, loyalty and honour by standing in for Romeo when he refuses to fight Tybalt.

**Themes**

**Fate**

Benvolio’s certainty that a conflict will occur adds to the overriding and universal power of fate within the plot.

**Honour**

Honour is a central theme in the play and particularly in this scene. Tybalt, Mercutio and Romeo (in revenging Mercutio’s murder) all act to maintain a personal or public sense of honour and reputation. Whilst Romeo is less concerned with his public face, he sees his friend’s death as his fault and acts to revenge it. Mercutio dies confused and disgusted by Romeo’s apparent cowardice and dishonour in refusing to fight Tybalt.

**Loyalty**

Ties of family and friendship drive and restrict the behaviour of the main characters. Ironically, in marrying Juliet prior to this scene, Romeo’s loyalties are now split, and this conflict of interests leads to Mercutio’s death.

**Interpretations**

Some modern directors interpret the friendship between Romeo and Mercutio as in conflict with Romeo’s new love for Juliet. This interpretation infers that Mercutio’s mocking of Romeo’s ‘love’, his pursuit of him after the ball and his determination to stand and fight for him in this scene is evidence of his jealousy or possessiveness. Sometimes Mercutio is shown as a jealous friend who feels as if he has been overlooked, but in some more controversial interpretations Mercutio is implied to have sexual feelings for Romeo. When playing Mercutio in the Globe’s 2004 production, James Garnon initially dismissed this interpretation of Mercutio’s sexuality, describing it as ‘unhelpful’ to approaching the role. Later, however, he reflected: ‘Mercutio may well be in some sort of love with Romeo ...what I’ve [found] really impressive is the scale and intensity of his love’. He concluded by suggesting, ‘At the moment, I think it might be quite useful to play Mercutio as someone who is not entirely certain about his sexual orientation. Uncertainty is more interesting, especially with Mercutio’. [1]
Source 9

In Shakespeare’s day, female parts were played by male actors, while more recently, actresses have taken on some of his most famous male roles such as Hamlet and Julius Caesar. Clare McManus explores gender in the history of Shakespeare performance.

Shakespearean performance is an arena for exploring desire, sexuality and gender roles and for challenging audience expectations, especially when it comes to the female performer. Actresses have long claimed their right to Olympian roles like Hamlet: Sarah Bernhardt’s 1899 performance sits in a long tradition, most recently added to by Maxine Peake in her performance at Manchester’s Royal Exchange in 2014. Bernhardt’s performance divided audiences: this was certainly at least partly to do with the crossing of gender boundaries, with one early London reviewer revealing how polarised ideas of gender could be when he complained that ‘A woman is positively no more capable of beating out the music of Hamlet than is a man of expressing the plaintive and half-accomplished surrender of Ophelia’.\(^1\) That said, it had become increasingly common by the turn of the 20th century for star actresses to take male parts, often called ‘breeches’ roles, and it is possible that one difficulty for London audiences lay in the fact that Bernhardt’s Hamlet was not Shakespeare’s text but a prose translation. Over a century later, Maxine Peake’s interpretation was widely praised, though reviewers still focussed on the presence of a female actor in the role, contextualising it against the rich history of female Hamlets and interrogating the opportunities open to women in theatre in the early 21st century.\(^2\)

The feminist principle that skilled female actors should have equality of access to meaty theatrical parts lay behind the all-female production of Julius Caesar directed by Phyllida Lloyd at the Donmar Warehouse in 2012, in which Frances Barber took the title role and Cush Jumbo played Mark Antony opposite Harriet Walter’s Brutus. This production deliberately offered its performers a far greater range and number of roles than the standard repertory usually allows. This is partly so because modern repertory stands in the long shadow of Shakespearean casting conditions. The stages of the earlier 17th-century commercial theatres were all-male preserves: women were part of the play-going audience and worked in the theatre buildings but they did not act on the commercial stages.\(^3\) So when Hamlet was first staged in 1600–01 and Julius Caesar in 1599, female roles were taken by a small cohort of highly trained boys. The small number of female roles in each play (usually no more than three or four roles that could be described as more than walk-on parts), have shaped and constrained opportunities for actresses on the modern stage. This kind of Shakespearean casting has been explored by productions such as the Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre’s Twelfth Night in 2002. In having the parts of Olivia and Viola taken by Mark Rylance and Eddie Redmayne, respectively, the Globe production partially recovered the casting practices of Shakespeare’s own time and, in asking audiences to focus on the actor’s skill rather than gender, examined both contemporary gender roles and their relationship to performance itself.

Women and Shakespeare in the early 20th century

Shakespearean theatre’s habit of exploring gender’s multiple possibilities, and indeed women’s central involvement in this exploration, is not a recent phenomenon. During World
War I, in a hut in Bloomsbury built to offer respite for soldiers on leave from the front, a group of pro-suffrage women called on a heady mix of Shakespeare and patriotism to authorise their performances. Ellen Terry, one of the most famous actresses of her day and herself a performer at the Shakespeare Hut, wrote that a debt was owed to Shakespeare ‘for his vindication of women in [his] fearless, high-spirited, resolute and intelligent heroines’. Inside the Hut, actresses performed Shakespearean pageants for the troops: on one occasion Terry herself played the cross-dressing Portia of *The Merchant of Venice* while younger actresses performed scenes from *Henry V*. This echoed earlier suffragist work that had appropriated carefully chosen female characters such as Portia or the charismatic Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra*), using Shakespeare to both inspire and legitimise political action.

At times, though, Shakespeare has become an authority figure for writers to kick against in despair. In 1929, several years after the Bloomsbury Shakespeare pageants, Virginia Woolf gave a very different picture of Shakespeare’s relationship to women’s lived experience. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf writes, ‘Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say’. Famously, Woolf then laments Judith’s short, frustrated life: denied education and theatrical training, having fled her Stratford home for London, she commits suicide when she finds herself pregnant. It is a moving, deeply thoughtful account.

And yet it is not the whole story. Almost 100 years later, new facts have emerged about women’s relationship to theatre in the 17th century and, while it’s true that were we to reimagine Judith Shakespeare now she would still not be able to act on the commercial stage, she would have been aware of women who did have access to education and who were actually required to train in the performing arts of dance, eloquence and music. This is a new history of women and early theatre, and for it we have to look back to the 17th century, first to the Restoration, then to Shakespeare’s own time.

### The first English actress?

On 8 December 1660 something remarkable happened. That day, a woman, probably Anne Marshall (later Quin, or Guin), took to the stage of London’s Vere Street Theatre to play Desdemona in a production of *Othello*: Marshall is the first recorded professional actress to take a Shakespearean role and she would go on to have a long, albeit patchy career in the London theatre. Her performance has an air of backstreet mystery and, in a prologue written especially for it, Thomas Jordan excites his audience with a provocative backstage glimpse of the actress:

> I saw the Lady drest;  
> The Woman playes to day, mistake me not,  
> No Man in Gown, or Page in Petty-Coat;  
> A Woman to my knowledge.

Just as Shakespeare’s Othello will demand ‘ocular proof’ about his wife’s character and behaviour (3.3.360), the English Restoration theatre audience seem to need to have the presence of the woman on stage ‘proved’ to them by the implicit revelation of her body to
their gaze. As is clear from the frontispiece of *Othello* in Nicholas Rowe’s 1709 edition, this voyeuristic impulse characterises much of Restoration theatre.

**Boy actors and the ‘all-male stage’**

As we know, and as Thomas Jordan’s prologue makes very clear, prior to Marshall, women did not play Shakespearean roles. Instead, the practice of casting boy actors in female parts meant that the playful exploration of gender was written into these plays from the start. Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre used cosmetics and cross-dressing to exploit audiences’ awareness that they were watching a boy playing a female character and to tease them with that knowledge. So, to return to *Twelfth Night* (1600–01), its early audiences saw a boy actor playing the part of Viola, who then disguises herself as a boy called Cesario.

Shakespeare’s theatre layered gender roles to tantalise audiences, drawing on the virtuosic skill of the highly trained young men (aged between 12 and 21 years old) who played these complex female characters.¹¹¹ Not that the boy-as-woman was universally accepted: those opposed to the theatre feared that cross-dressing would corrupt its audience and destroy the distinction between the sexes. Much of this fear and much of the energy of Shakespeare’s cross-dressed dramas depends on desire. In *Twelfth Night*, for instance, Viola/Cesario quickly falls in love with her new master, Orsino, and he himself seems to desire her new page, hinting at his pleasure in the layering of male and female as he describes Cesario:

> they shall yet belie thy happy years,  
> That say thou art a man. Diana’s lip  
> Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe  
> Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,  
> And all is semblative a woman’s part. (1.4.30–34)

What’s perhaps most striking here is that there is no attempt to hide the presence of the boy playing the female role; in fact, attention is drawn to it because the ‘woman’s part’ refers both to the absent female body and the theatrical ‘part’ of Viola that the boy performs. Such moments revel in the layering of gender identity and disguise.

**Women and Shakespearean theatre: a new history**

Pivotal as it was, Anne Marshall’s star turn as Desdemona did not change English theatre overnight. For one thing, boy actors performed female roles well into the Restoration. In 1660 Pepys famously called Edward Kynaston, one of the last of these boys, ‘the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life, only her voice not very good’. What’s more, Marshall may have been a pioneer but, as she stepped out onto the Vere Street stage, she took her place in a long line of theatrical Englishwomen who, though absent from the early 17th-century playhouse stages, did in fact perform in a range of other venues and ways. Two extreme examples offer a glimpse into this alternative history of women and Shakespearean theatre.

The first theatrical woman is a notorious London underworld figure: the cross-dressing fence Mary Frith, aka Moll Cutpurse (c. 1584–1659). In late April or early May 1611, an astonishing spectacle unfolded at the Fortune playhouse. At a performance of Middleton
and Dekker’s *Roaring Girl*, a sanitised version of Frith’s life, Moll Cutpurse herself watched from the side of the stage as a boy acted her part. Once the play was over, Frith took up a lute, played, sang and taunted the crowd that many of them were of opinion that she was a man, but if any of them would come to her lodging they should finde that she is a woman.

Close to the stage yet not truly on it, the cross-dressed Frith offers a glimpse into the ways costume and gender roles could be exploited both on and off stage.

The second theatrical woman emphatically takes centre stage. Queen Anna of Denmark (1574–1619), wife of King James VI and I, commissioned and performed in the lavish theatricals of the Jacobean court masque. Luxurious one-off events that employed the court’s full resources, the masque had elite performance at its heart and, in the first years of the 17th century, women were the masque’s main performers. On the court stage, Anna and her women took silent, symbolic roles, creating meaning through the display and movement of their bodies. In fact, court masques often exposed the female body, giving the invited audience visible proof of the difference between the noblewomen and the cross-dressed boys who acted alongside them and took the speaking roles that the silent women were denied. This is at an extreme in Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Queens*, performed at court in 1609. In it, Anna and her ladies danced as exalted queens of history, banishing grotesque witches played by male performers in female dress.

Women, then, were far more involved in Shakespearean theatre than either Woolf’s lament for Judith Shakespeare’s lost talent or Anne Marshall’s starring moment in December 1660 might suggest. History has changed, bringing to light a long and energetic tradition of women’s involvement in Shakespearean theatre against which we can judge the interventions of our own day.
A number of Shakespeare’s plays show daughters negotiating the demands of their fathers, often trying to reconcile duty with a desire for independence. Kim Ballard considers five of Shakespeare’s most memorable literary daughters: Juliet, Desdemona, Portia, Katherina and Cordelia.

When we consider that Shakespeare lived in an age when all actors were male and the subject matter of serious drama focused heavily on the exploits of men, it’s hardly surprising that female characters are in a minority in his plays. And yet Shakespeare created many complex and engaging female roles for his young male actors to perform. Parent-child relationships feature heavily, and a significant number of these involve fathers and daughters. Interestingly, mothers are often absent from the drama, throwing the daughter/father relationship into sharp relief. A father of two daughters himself, Shakespeare’s dramatic daughters make a formidable line-up of young women, most of them at a transitional stage between the protection of their childhood home and an adult life beyond it. The transition is rarely a smooth one: in both comedies and tragedies, tension rises as daughters go in search of love, adventure and independence. Here are just a few of their stories.

**Juliet: ‘yet a stranger in the world’**

*Romeo and Juliet* may be a love story, but a daughter/father relationship lies at the heart of the play’s events. Juliet is not yet 14 when the young nobleman Paris approaches her father Capulet for permission to woo his daughter. At first, Capulet seems protective of Juliet, his only surviving child, and proposes that ‘two more summers’ should pass before ‘we may think her ripe to be a bride’ (1.2.10–11). But Paris is a good prospect, a relative of the Prince of Verona, so Capulet agrees to Paris’s request, inviting him to a family feast that very evening which Juliet will be attending.

In Shakespeare’s time, daughters of respectable families, like Juliet, could expect their fathers to have a significant involvement in choosing their future husband. This reflected the subordinate position of women in a patriarchal society, and particularly the traditional view that daughters were a commodity and could be used in marriage to forge useful alliances. Paternal involvement in husband selection provided fertile material for Shakespeare in many of his plays, and he makes considerable dramatic use of the resulting family clashes. Initially, Capulet is seemingly kinder than many fathers in allowing Juliet some say over her future husband: ‘But woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart, / My will to her consent is but a part...’ (1.2.16–17).

Later in the play, however, when the family is in shock after their kinsman Tybalt has been murdered, Capulet leaps ahead and sets an early date for the wedding without consulting his daughter first. ‘I think she will be rul’d / In all respects by me’ (3.4.13–14) he comments, clearly expecting Juliet to be compliant.

The obedient way young women of the 16th century were meant to behave towards their parents was not only reflected in religious teaching but also well documented in
publications known as ‘conduct books’. At the beginning of the play, Lady Capulet – sent to speak to Juliet by her husband – tells Juliet about Paris’s interest in her, and encourages her to consider him. Juliet’s reply exemplifies the behaviour expected of her:

I’ll look to like, if looking liking move;
But no more deep will I endart mine eye
Than your consent gives strength to make it fly.
(1.3.97–99)

Unfortunately, Juliet’s dutiful words are soon forgotten when, overcome by her ‘warm youthful blood’, she falls in love with Romeo (the son of her father’s enemy) and marries him in secret. Inevitably then, she must disobey her father later in the play by refusing to marry Paris. Capulet is furious. Despite Juliet’s attempts to remain respectful towards him, ‘Good father, I beseech you on my knees / Hear me with patience but to speak a word’ (3.5.158–59), he threatens to disown her if she doesn’t comply with his wishes: ‘And you be mine, I’ll give you to my friend, / And you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets’ (3.5.191–92).

It’s part of Juliet’s tragedy that she’s unable to tell her authoritarian father about her marriage to Romeo, even though she could express her love with an eloquence that could overcome anger and hatred. Capulet is determined to ‘give’ her to Paris (a father’s prerogative, even enshrined in the marriage ceremony) and she feels she has little option but to agree to Friar Laurence’s drastic plan to fake her own death in order to extricate herself from this situation – a plan that is doomed to go horribly wrong.

Desdemona: maker of a ‘gross revolt’

Juliet is just one of several daughters in Shakespeare who make their own choice of husband, even at the risk or expense of displeasing their fathers and finding themselves torn between conflicting loyalties. The tragedy of Othello begins with the news that Desdemona, the daughter of the respected Venetian senator Brabantio, has not only secretly eloped, but has chosen a man of a different race – Othello, a Moor (and actually her father’s friend) – for her husband. On discovering this, Brabantio is outraged:

BRABANTIO Now, Roderigo,
   Where didst thou see her? – O unhappy girl! –
   With the Moor, say’st thou? – Who would be a father! –
   How didst thou know ’twas she? – O, she deceives me
   Past thought! – What said she to you? – Get more tapers;
   Raise all my kindred. – Are they married, think you?

RODERIGO Truly, I think they are.

BRABANTIO O heaven! how got she out? O treason of the blood!
   Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds
   By what you see them act.
(1.1.162–71)
Brabantio sees Desdemona’s actions as nothing less than treachery. He can hardly believe she managed to ‘escape’ from the house, let alone deceive him in this way. In fact, he finds her actions so uncharacteristic of his quiet and diffident daughter, he takes some convincing that Othello hasn’t drugged her ‘with some mixtures pow’rful o’er the blood’ (1.3.104). However, Othello explains how he won Desdemona’s love and how, when he visited Brabantio, she would hurry through the ‘house affairs’ for which she was responsible in order to listen to his exciting tales of travel and adventure. She even expressed envy of Othello’s experiences, wishing that ‘heaven had made her such a man’ (1.3.163). A picture emerges of a dutiful but stifled daughter looking for a life beyond the confines of her family home.

Unlike Juliet, Desdemona at least manages to give an account of her position to her father. She may have married without Brabantio’s consent, but she acknowledges her ‘divided duty’ between him and her husband, while making clear what her new situation demands:

My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you; you are the lord of duty;
I am hitherto your daughter; But here’s my husband;
And so much duty as my mother show’d
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor, my lord.
(1.3.183–89)

Perhaps softened by this declaration, Brabantio relents and (in another echo of the marriage ceremony) says to Othello:

I here do give thee that with all my heart
Which but thou hast already, with all my heart
I would keep from thee...
(1.3.193–95)

Before taking leave of the couple, however, he warns Othello about his new wife:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;
She has deceiv’d her father, and may thee.
(1.3.292–93)

There’s an irony to this warning: Desdemona remains utterly faithful to her husband, but Othello’s willingness to believe she has indeed deceived him drives the play to its tragic conclusion.

Portia: ‘a lady richly left’

In his comedies too, Shakespeare exploits the dynamics of daughter/father relationships. While Juliet and Desdemona find themselves in direct confrontation with their fathers over their choice of husbands, Portia in The Merchant of Venice is ‘curb’d by the will’ of her
deceased father (1.2.25). Thanks to her inheritance, she enjoys a degree of independence, but lacks the freedom to choose her husband. Instead, her suitors must undergo a test involving caskets of gold, silver and lead: the successful suitor – who cannot be refused – will be the one who finds her portrait within his chosen casket. Portia seems indignant at the imposition of this ‘lottery’, but her maid, Nerissa, reminds her that her father was ‘ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations’ (1.2.27–28). Needless to say, it’s Portia’s hoped-for husband, Bassanio, who correctly opts for the casket of lead.

Having secured the man of her dreams by complying with her father’s wishes, Portia later takes on a role in which she acts independently of both her father and her new husband. Disguising herself as the highly capable lawyer Balthazar, she wins a legal case brought against her husband’s friend Antonio by Shylock the Jew. In a letter of introduction, Bellario (a lawyer who has sent Balthazar/Portia to act on his behalf) describes him in glowing terms:

He is furnish’d with my opinion, which better’d with his own learning, the greatness whereof I cannot enough commend, comes with him, at my importunity, to fill up your Grace’s request in my stead. I beseech you let his lack of years be no impediment to let him lack a reverend estimation, for I never knew so young a body with so old a head. (4.1.157–64)

In her scene as Balthazar, Portia certainly shows herself to be a highly educated woman. Although most daughters of the time were expected to occupy themselves primarily with domestic concerns (as Desdemona did), the tide was slowly turning against traditional patriarchal values and in favour of women’s education. The humanist scholar Juan Luis Vives, for example, who had tutored Elizabeth I’s half-sister Mary (Elizabeth’s predecessor as monarch), had written an influential conduct book on The Education of a Christian Woman (1524). By the reign of Elizabeth I – herself a highly educated woman, firm in her belief she could reign without marrying – a significant number of women from more privileged backgrounds were starting to enjoy a greater degree of freedom and learning. Portia may have submitted to the will of her father at the beginning of the play, but the ‘ring’ trick she plays on Bassanio at the end suggests she expects independence and equality within her marriage.

**Katherina: ‘Renown’d in Padua for her scolding tongue’**

Another comic heroine, Katherina in The Taming of the Shrew, is the very opposite of the meek and dutiful daughter, a thorn in the side of her long-suffering father, Baptista. Modelled on the popular stereotype of the scolding woman, her behaviour appears particularly shrewish in contrast with her seemingly compliant younger sister Bianca. Wondering how he will ever marry off his older daughter, Baptista has decreed that Bianca will not be allowed to marry until a husband has been found for Kate. When Petruchio steps up to the challenge of taking her on, Baptista has to warn him to expect ‘some unhappy words’. Having met Petruchio, Kate even scolds her father for trying to organise a husband for her:

Call you me daughter? Now I promise you
You have show’d a tender fatherly regard,
To wish me wed to one half lunatic,
A madcap ruffian and a swearing Jack.
(2.1.285–88)

Against her will, however, Katherina is married to Petruchio who, wearing her down through hunger and exhaustion, succeeds in taming her, much to Baptista’s amazement.

Modern audiences can find qualities to admire in daughters like Juliet, Desdemona and Portia, who know their own minds and seek freedom from certain parental and social constraints. But Katherina presents us with a difficulty, changing as she does from independence to obedience. Here is an extract from her closing speech:

I am asham’d that women are so simple
To offer war where they should kneel for peace,
Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,
When they are bound to serve, love, and obey.
(5.2.161–64)

Many critics have grappled with the problem of Kate’s taming, not least because they find it hard to believe that Shakespeare could be so apparently sexist. They argue instead that the final twist is completely ironic, or that Shakespeare was really attacking those fathers and husbands who expected women to submit to them. Either way, The Taming of the Shrew contributes some thought-provoking material to any consideration of daughters in Shakespeare in terms of the wives they have become by the end of the play. However, in the last play included here, it is the daughter/father relationship that remains central to the drama to the very end.

Cordelia: ‘this unpriz’d precious maid’

The tragedy of King Lear is a play about the love between a father and his youngest and favourite daughter, Cordelia, the one he hopes will look after him in his old age. At the play’s opening, Lear has devised a game of flattery in order to divide the kingdom he no longer wishes to rule between Cordelia and her two older sisters, Goneril and Regan. Refusing to compete with the ‘glib and oily art’ (1.1.224) of their speeches, and pressed by Lear to say something more than ‘nothing’, Cordelia opts for simplicity and honesty in expressing her affection for him:

Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, lov’d me. I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all?
(1.1.95–100)
Unlike other daughters in Shakespeare, Cordelia’s defiance of her father is not about marriage, but about a principle. Lear’s disappointment with her speech earns her not land, but banishment.

Cordelia doesn’t reappear until the closing stages of the play, when she returns to Britain to rescue her father from madness and the cruel neglect meted out by her older sisters. In a moving reconciliation scene, Lear admits he was wrong to treat Cordelia as he did:

**LEAR**

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.  
I know you do not love me, for your sisters  
Have (as I do remember) done me wrong:  
You have some cause, they have not.

**CORDELIA**  
No cause, no cause.  
(4.7.71–74)

In his final speech to her, after Cordelia’s forces have been defeated, he imagines the closing years of his life with the daughter he loves:

Come let’s away to prison:  
We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage;  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down  
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies.  
(5.3.8–13)

Lear is not alone among Shakespearean fathers in regretting the rash and foolish way he has treated his daughter. From a psychological point of view, the tyrannical behaviour of fathers seems to stem from their fears of facing old age alone, as well as from the hopes and strong feelings they have for their daughters. Some commentators have even found an incestuous element at work in the unfolding of the plot of *King Lear*. Despite Lear’s earlier treatment of her, Cordelia’s kindness towards him and her willingness to risk her life in order to save his, is testament to the unbroken bond that exists between this particular father and daughter.
Source 11

Criticism that the classic doomed love story glorifies immaturity misses the point: Shakespeare was riffing on how people use the young/old binary to manipulate others.

I haven't read Romeo and Juliet since I was in high school 25 years ago. High school is, of course, a time of rampaging hormones and extravagant romantic angst; in theory, the perfect life moment to read Romeo and Juliet. In practice... eh. I think my favorite character was Mercutio. I thought he was funny.

I just reread the play last week, inspired by Alyssa Rosenberg's declaration at Slate that "Romeo and Juliet is a terrible play." The comments section erupted in howls of outrage... but I was intrigued. Suddenly, I was curious to find out what I thought of a work I hadn't revisited in more than two decades.

Rosenberg argued that "Romeo and Juliet—a play about children—is full of terrible, deeply childish ideas about love." Juliet, Rosenberg reminds us, is 13. If you cast someone that age in the role now, the result is queasy. If you cast someone older, you end up with an adult actor behaving like she's a tween. Romeo's age is uncertain, but a lot of what he does is immature, and adolescent as well. The lovers' haste to marry strains credulity—it seems (though Rosenberg doesn't quite say this) like a childish fantasy of love at first sight. Similarly, the reconciliation of the lovers' warring families upon their demise reads for Rosenberg as "an adolescent fantasy of death solving all problems."

Adolescent or not, though, I sure enjoyed reading it this time through. Romeo and Juliet's first meeting, for example, all by itself validates the romantic comedy genre.

**ROME O**

[To JULIET] If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle fine 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.

**ROME O**

Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

**JULIET**

Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.
That is some searingly saucy banter, there. "Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer" has to be one of the archest lines in all of literature. I'm with Romeo. I'd fall in love with that.
In short, now that I'm an adult, I appreciate the young lovers a good bit more than I did when I was their age. This may be counterintuitive... but it also seems to be one of the main points of the play itself.

A number of Rosenberg's commenters noted that *Romeo and Juliet* is deliberately about young love. This is no doubt true. But the play is also, and insistently, about age. The fact that Juliet is 13, for example, is not just mentioned once. It comes up again and again. Moreover, the first time Juliet appears on stage, her aged comic Nurse launches into a rambling anecdote about when her charge was a toddler, an anecdote that Juliet clearly finds both tedious and embarrassing. Juliet's youth, then, is adamantly established, and also adamantly presented as a source of fascination for the elderly.

Old/young remains an obsession throughout the play—but that obsession does not, interestingly, work in any single way. Sometimes, being young means being rash and changeable, as when Romeo switches his hyperbolic affections from Rosalind to Juliet. Sometimes, it means being a hope for the future—as when the Friar marries the couple to try to end the feud between Montagues and Capulets. There are passages where old and young are presented as almost different species, as when Juliet irritably declaims, "...old folks, many feign as they were dead; /Unwieldy, slow, heavy and pale as lead."

And then there are moments where it seems like old and young don't really act all that differently. Juliet's hasty marriage to Romeo, for example, isn't much more precipitous than Lord Capulet's sudden decision to marry her to Paris. And Romeo's affections aren't any more changeable than those of the nurse, who, having cheerfully helped Juliet marry Romeo, just as cheerfully advises her to forget that first marriage and turn polyandrist by wedding as her father wishes.

Rosenberg might argue that even the adults behave like kids in *Romeo and Juliet* because the play itself is childish. But... is Capulet really childish? Is the nurse? Surely, you don't have to be young to be precipitate or fickle. Adults behave like children with some frequency. And—if having sex is considered to be adult behavior—vice versa. For *Romeo and Juliet*, in other words, youth and age seem less like solid, immutable categories than like tropes. They're devices manipulated by Juliet or Romeo to give force to their sense of indignation or specialness. Or manipulated by the nurse to give force to her affection and nostalgia. Or manipulated by Shakespeare to sweep (adults?) into a romantic swoon. Or manipulated by Rosenberg, to denigrate that same swooning. From this perspective, the point of the play isn't so much the exhilaration of young love or the dunderheadedness of young love. Rather (as often with Shakespeare) the point is the language itself: the dazzling, disturbing rhetorical force of old/young, corrupt/innocent, experienced/naïve.

Rosenberg claims that *Romeo and Juliet* is dated because of the uncomfortable way its childishness, and its child protagonists, sit in our contemporary culture. I'd argue, though, that that uncomfortableness is not a contemporary addition, but is instead one of the things Shakespeare was writing about to begin with. At that first flirtatious meeting, for example, Romeo is masked with friends at a Capulet party. Old Capulet, seeing the maskers, reminisces about when he used to do the same.
CAPULET
What, man! 'tis not so much, 'tis not so much:
'Tis since the nuptials of Lucentio,
Come pentecost as quickly as it will,
Some five and twenty years; and then we mask'd.

Second Capulet
'Tis more, 'tis more, his son is elder, sir;
His son is thirty.

CAPULET
Will you tell me that?
His son was but a ward two years ago.

ROMEO
[To a Servingman] What lady is that, which doth enrich the hand
Of yonder knight?

Capulet slips back through time... and when he stops slipping, it is Romeo who speaks and goes to woo Juliet. Capulet was Romeo, Romeo is Capulet—and so, by substitution, the lover of the daughter is the father. The mask is a device not so much to enable young love, as to enable the old to imagine young love.

In *Romeo and Juliet* play-acting with the categories of adult and child can lead to exhilarating delight, pleasurably moralistic revulsion and, sometimes, to tragedy. If, in our own day, we have pushed the onset of adulthood past the tweens, past the teens, and even to some degree up into the 20s—that makes the play’s insights and its sometimes exasperating perversities more relevant, not less.
Do Film adaptations of Romeo and Juliet enhance Shakespeare in contemporary society or undermine his cultural status?

Film adaptations have long been considered as involving a lowering of the status of the original venerated book or play. The assumption is that they not only simplify the source, but that they also undermine it and its place in the classical canon. As Linda Hutcheon asserts in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), ‘if an adaptation is perceived as “lowering” a story (according to some imagined hierarchy of medium or genre) response is likely to be negative.’[1] This leads people to assume that authors and texts such as Shakespeare are on a classical pedestal and cannot be touched or reproduced, unless it is by a higher art form. Hutcheon continues that ‘it seems more or less acceptable to adapt Romeo and Juliet into a respected high art form, like an opera or a ballet, but not to make it into a movie.’[2] However it has been suggested that rather than undermining classical works, media adaptations can enhance them, pulling them down from reverential pedestals and making them palatable to the masses. Courtney Lehmann argues that adaptations can reverse the attitude of looking down on anything ‘non Shakespearian’[3] and ‘safeguard [...] the bards sacred place in the pantheon of dramatic literature.’[4] Zeffirelli said of his adaptation of Romeo and Juliet that, ‘“I have always felt sure I could break the myth that Shakespeare on stage and screen is only an exercise for the intellectual. I want his plays to be enjoyed by ordinary people.”’[5] During his own time, Shakespeare was for the masses and for entertainment, as Lynda Boose remarks; ‘in a sense Shakespeare himself was not only a popular artist but also a populariser. For a largely illiterate audience he transferred from page to stage and from narrative to drama some of the central writings of his time.’[6]

This essay will discuss the impacts of film adaptation on Shakespeare in the literary canon, in particular the adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* by Franco Zeffirelli in 1968 and *Romeo + Juliet* by Baz Luhrmann in 1996. These two films have been selected due to their status as appealing to a youthful audience and therefore selected by schools as the way in which we introduce Shakespeare to a new generation. Lehmann believes that ‘it (Zeffirelli) has stood the test of time as a film that is shown, often in comparison with Baz Luhrmann’s adaptation, in classrooms around the world.’[7] In order to study in detail the use of the original Shakespearean text this essay will also study two scenes from Romeo and Juliet; Act one Scene five; the ball and Act three Scene one; Mercutio’s death. Both Baz Luhrmann and Franco Zeffirelli have been a popular choice for use in schools, due to their apparent appeal to a younger audience. Russell Jackson explains that both ‘Franco Zeffirelli (1968) and Baz Luhrmann (1996) – appealed to a youthful audience by casting young Actors as Romeo and Juliet and presenting the conflict between generations within a contemporary context.’[8] In casting youthful actors, the directors made them more appealing to a teenage audience. This can be seen especially in Act one Scene five, in which Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time. Both directors use dance and song for the first meeting; Zeffirelli uses a traditional Italian dance, the moresca, which fits with his period.
style drama and would have been similar to the dances used on stage in the 1590s, when *Romeo and Juliet* was originally performed. This dance is fast paced and less formal than the previous dance, ‘involv[ing] a dizzying interweaving of hands, gazes and bodies’,[9] gradually building up to mirror the heightening feelings of Romeo and Juliet. The youth of the actors is particularly noticeable here, due to the close ups Zeffirelli uses of their faces which appear young and ingenuous. Luhrmann uses a similar motif technique, blurring everything else whilst the couple fall in love. As Lehmann notes ‘in Luhrmann’s film, this motif is revisited in the form of Romeo’s ecstasy trip which mimics the frenzied whirl and hum of love-at-first-sight.’[10]

These references to drugs are a part of what Luhrmann uses to grasp teenagers interest, by using popular culture as context; during the 1990s drug use by teenagers was increasing. Luhrmann uses this explicitly, cleverly using the line from later in the play ‘thy drugs are quick’[11] when Romeo dies, giving it an alternative meaning as well as ‘foreshadowing’[12] Romeo’s use of drugs to commit suicide later in the play. Through this, Lehmann explains that ‘we glimpse the postmodern confrontation between Shakespeare, Zeffirelli and Luhrmann’s sex, drugs and rock-an-roll rendition of star-crossed love through the magnifying glass of a rabid intertextuality.’[13]

To contrast the fast paced excitement of the dances, both directors use a slow song for the actual meeting of Romeo and Juliet; in both films this song then becomes the theme for Romeo and Juliet’s love. The song ‘kissing you, which comes to function in the film as Romeo and Juliet’s personal love theme, much in the same way that Nino Rota’s arrangement does in Zeffirelli’s adaptation.’[14] In Zeffirelli’s adaptation, this scene is a kind of hide and seek between Romeo and Juliet, each searching for the other in a childlike game, their young faces contrasted with the disapproving looks of the older folk around them. The use of song is particularly important to the sequence of Romeo and Juliet’s meeting in Luhrmann’s adaptation, which plays as their eyes meet through an aquarium. Lehmann explains that ‘Luhrmann’s camera produces a series of floating eye-line matches that follow Romeo and Juliet’s gaze as they dart about in search of each other through the strobe-like glint of water, fish and wonder that characterises this surreal love-at-first-sight sequence.’[15] This striking imagery, coupled with the Des’ree song, creates ‘a kind of aural scenography which is as important as the costumes [...] it is a sound which creeps into you.’[16] This use of a popular sound track, coupled with Luhrmann’s use of ‘glossy atmospherics, and breakneck speed’[17] is what many use to criticise Luhrmann’s adaptation as a ‘parody or even burlesque, a hip [...] retelling aimed at an irredeemably lowbrow audience of clueless teenagers living in an intellectually bankrupt culture.’[18] However, critic Marco Calavita suggests that the MTV label is a ‘film criticism fallacy.’[19] Anderegg goes further to say that,

The MTV style has become a kind of shorthand through which scholars and critics establish – and in fact seek to perpetuate – ‘us’ / ‘them’ oppositions, which typically fracture along the predictable lines of ‘art versus commerce, adult culture versus youth culture[20]
Zeffirelli focused his film largely around the struggles young people were going through at the time of its creation. Critic Sarah Munson Deats points out that Zeffirelli, ‘particularly intended to attract the counter culture youth, a generation of young people, like Romeo and Juliet, estranged from their parents, torn by the conflict between their youthful cult of passion and the military traditions of their elders.’[21] This conflicted youth can be seen in the ferocity of the gang fighting shown in Zeffirelli’s opening scene, between the Montagues and the Capulets. The men fighting are extremely young, continuing a feud commenced before they were born and whose origins are never explained, much like the youths who were fighting the Vietnam War, which began in 1968. 1968 is described by Lehmann as a ‘miraculously impetuous year, marked not only by the infamous May riots [...] the rising tide of anti-Vietnam war sentiment [...] A ripple effect in the world of film ensued.’[22] This integration of conflict in Romeo and Juliet is not a recent addition, as the play is described as having ‘implicit cultural violence.’[23] This is perhaps because whilst Shakespeare was writing England was filled with discontent and conflict, as Lehmann points out: ‘In June of 1595 – a time when Romeo and Juliet was likely being performed in London – the heat and madness reached a fevered pitch, as twelve of the thirteen riots recorded that year occurred between June 6 and June 29.’[24] The integration of historical events is not then a new innovation of film adaptations and not therefore a justification for criticism. To further appeal to his younger target audience, Zeffirelli only included, ‘35 per cent (approximately 1,044.5 lines) of Shakespeare’s script.’[25] He intentionally reduced the text, in order to concentrate further on the central characters and make them less complicated, as well as to ‘minimize the disadvantages of casting inexperienced actors’,[26] therefore making them more attractive to his audience. In developing Shakespeare for a younger audience, Zeffirelli enhanced Shakespeare’s reputation as not just for the scholarly and intellectual, but also for the entertainment of the young.

Luhrmann directed his adaptation to what Patricia Tatspaugh describes as the ‘MTV generation or teenagers roughly the age of Romeo and Juliet.’[27] Many critics saw this as a downfall of Luhrmann’s adaptation, dismissing it as, ‘postmodern tom-foolery.’[28] It did however encourage teenagers to see his film. One of the ways he did this was through his setting; Luhrmann used the setting of Mexico City. Lehmann describes this as ‘interpreting ‘fair’ as ‘foul’, shooting on location in the polluted and politically corrupt corporate centre of Mexico City.’[29] This setting allowed Luhrmann to set the stage for a corrupt and gang-ridden city that was his vision of Verona. Although this may strike some as a radical change from Shakespeare’s ‘fair Verona’,[30] the image of Mexico City that many teenagers have - as exciting, dangerous and corrupt - is similar to the Elizabethan view of Italy when Shakespeare was alive. :Lehmann remarks that ‘Luhrmann’s depiction of Verona beach and its inhabitants attitudes to Latinity bears striking parallels with Shakespeare’s Verona and Elizabethan assumptions about Spain and Italy.’[31] Further, Lehmann describes Italy as being ‘England’s, hot-blooded neighbour to the south [which] was ‘marvellous dangerous’
to English youth.’[32] In this changing of the setting, Luhrmann has created the Verona of 1996.

In creating *Romeo + Juliet*, Luhrmann aimed to bring Shakespeare up to date and attempt to remove the stigma attached to Shakespearean films as being old fashioned, long and slow. He remarked that ‘we’re trying to make this movie rambunctious, sexy, violent, and entertaining the way Shakespeare might have if he had been a filmmaker.’[33] To do this, he not only had to update the setting and the weapons, but the characters; to make them believable and to fit into a modern society. As Julie Sanders contests, ‘[t]he adaptation of Shakespeare invariably makes him ‘fit’ for new cultural contexts and different political ideologies to those to those of his own age.’[34] Two characters Luhrmann changes dramatically are Friar Lawrence and Mercutio. In Zeffirelli’s adaptation, the Friar is old, balding and chubby, wearing brown monk’s robes, and has been described as, ‘affectionate but dotty.’[35] Luhrmann portrays him dressing in bright Hawaiian style shirts with a large tattoo of a crucifix on his back; this religious imagery is reminiscent of Vegas style churches, and reflected in Friar Lawrence’s church in Luhrmann’s film, which is abundant with neon glowing crucifixes. Lehmann believes that this ‘heavy handed use of religious symbolism has affected the films critical reception’ in a negative way.’[36] In trying to make his films accessible and understandable to teenagers, Luhrmann drew the criticism of many who argued against the simplifying of Shakespeare. However in terms of characterisation, Luhrmann does this in order to make Friar Lawrence into a figure whom modern teenagers might understand Romeo seeking help and advice from, thereby maintaining his accepted status as the trusted confidant and helper of Romeo and Juliet. The sexually ambiguous portrayal of Mercutio has also sparked critical controversies. Luhrmann depicts him as a ‘buff, drag queen’[37] during the costume ball scene, which can be argued is not just a costume, but a way in which he ‘expresses gender confusion and anxiety.’[38] It can also be argued that Luhrmann is not simply creating ethical and sexuality diversity in his film to replicate today’s society, but is continuing what other directors before him have begun. Zeffirelli’s Mercutio suggests ‘Mercutio’s homoerotic attachment to Romeo’, as Zeffirelli presents Mercutio as, ‘desperate […] to retain Romeo’s (attention) by keeping him loyal to the values of the male pack.’[39] To signpost this relationship between Mercutio and Romeo, Zeffirelli uses Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech, after which ‘Romeo clasps Mercutio’s face to his in an effort to console him.’[40] Some critics see this as a romantic gesture; ‘[f]ilmed in tight profile, this two-shot shows Romeo and Mercutio’s foreheads resting softly against one another […] their impassioned and deeply private exchange is as romantic – in its own subtle way – as the Scenes between Romeo and Juliet.’[41] This appears to be a narrow minded view, due to Zeffirelli’s open homosexuality, that he cannot show the love between two men who are like brothers, without him being accused of putting homosexuality into the film, with Lehmann remarking that ‘others have more crudely described Zeffirelli’s camera – at its best – as one-sidedly ‘homosexual’ or – at its worst – even ‘sodomizing’.’[42]
Whilst Shakespeare was writing, ‘England was being threatened from both within and outside of its geographical borders.’ This latent violence underlines much of the play, which ‘depicts Verona as ripe for rebellion, opening with images of ‘mutiny’ and ‘civil blood (shed),’ wrought by the ‘ancient grudge’ between the Capulets and the Montagues.’ Zeffirelli and Luhrmann use similar techniques to include historical context in their adaptations of Romeo and Juliet. Zeffirelli even described his film as ‘a documentary for the period’ This is particularly evident in their depiction of Act three Scene one – Mercutio’s death revealing the brutal truth of Verona and its instability, which appears when Mercutio and Tybalt have both died and everything in the lovers world falls apart. Lehmann asserts that ‘this precarious equilibrium proves unsustainable in the wake of Tybalt’s murder of Mercutio.’ It is the point in the play at which there is no turning back for Romeo and Juliet, the ‘tragic turning point’ (p197,SA). Zeffirelli and Luhrmann interpret this in different ways. Zeffirelli’s fight scene takes place in the dusty and mostly deserted streets of Verona, which have tall walks and not much in the way of colour, showing Verona as a prison like containment for Romeo and Juliet’s love. The fight itself begins quite jovially between Tybalt and Mercutio; Mercutio ‘playfully engages Tybalt in an epic sword fight – one that is filled with laughter, jests and even a handshake between the opponents.’ They appear to be trying to impress the crowd of Capulet’s and Montague’s around them, much like a gang of boys would in any time or society. Zeffirelli includes much physical humour, as if they are playing childishly with the swords. There appears to be no malicious intent behind their banter and joking; they play with the hay and do no more than tap each other with swords. In chopping off a piece of Mercutio’s hair, Tybalt shows himself to be more interested in humiliating Mercutio than killing him, until ‘Tybalt’s unintended fatal blow.’ In doing this, Zeffirelli adds a new dimension to the character of Tybalt, who can be depicted as a murderous killer and indeed appears to be so in many versions. However, in making it seem like a gang of boys whose messing around has gone too far, ‘Zeffirelli makes it clear that when the fun and games turn deadly, Michael York’s Tybalt is utterly horrified at the sight of Mercutio’s blood on his sword.’ Tybalt is looked at as less of a cold blooded killer, and more of a spoilt child showing off who does not like jokes being made at his expense. Luhrmann takes an alternative perspective, ignoring the empty bravado of Tybalt and turning him into a brute, not allowing him any added dimensions; we see in him no softness or remorse.

It is difficult to tell how Shakespeare intended Tybalt to be portrayed; as there are very few stage directions, everything rests in the tone of voice undertaken – is it the hot headed bluster of a naive young man or cold blooded desire, ‘Now, by the stock an hour of my kin/ to strike him dead I hold it not a sin.’ Capulet calls him a ‘Saucy boy’ and a ‘princox’; not the imagery of a cold-blooded killer, but a tempestuous youngster to be reined in. The dramatic change between the two styles of fighting is significant. Tybalt and Mercutio fight to a large crowd cheering and laughing at their mock fight, Tybalt and Romeo’s fight is darkened by Mercutio’s death; the crowd is serious, trying to help and the banter
like jeering disappears. The fighting also descends from civilised swordplay to hand to hand brawling in the dust. This physical closeness between the characters creates a more animalistic fight and death of one of them seems inevitable.

Luhrmann also seeks to bring Shakespeare’s scene of Mercutio’s death up to date as a believable act in modern society. To do this he uses a darker approach. From the beginning there is a sense of trespass when the Capulets arrive at Verona Beach. Both Mercutio and Tybalt are quicker to anger than Zeffirelli’s counterparts and appear to revel in the violence using physical rather than verbal banter, thereby allowing the Scene to move at a quicker pace, creating a greater sense of impending danger, or ‘unmistakeable urgency.’[55] This is an example of Lurhmann seizing ‘every opportunity to convert the potentially ‘dead language’ of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet into a distinctly cinematic visual language.’[56] Luhrmann uses the form of a cowboy standoff between the characters signposting a High Noon style denouement. The sense of immediate danger is also clear from the characters serious demeanours and the foreboding music. The film is liberal with its use of violence and Luhrmann is not afraid to show blood, showing the violence of the scene through the camera work, using many different angles and constantly cutting between shots to create a mad, disjointed scene. Critics have dubbed this as ‘bravura camerawork’[57] and criticised its over use and privileging over Shakespearean language. The emotions portrayed in this scene are amplified by Luhrmann placing it in a melodramatic tempest-like storm, which heavily contrasts to the stark setting of Zeffirelli’s fight scenes. The beach and the storm backdrop emphasise the wide-ranging danger of the situation, and yet concentrate ones view of the intimacy of death. The storm also symbolises the storm which awaits Romeo and Juliet, as after this scene their world is ripped apart, as is the beach after the storm. Luhrmann includes shots of buildings falling apart and being blown away as well as locals blocking up their homes and hiding from the onslaught of death. Film media allows such wild and dramatic allusions, which would be impossible to stage in a theatre, in a way this bring the images and thereby the story to life for the audience, who could arguably engage more in what they are watching. It also creates a more dynamic and exciting scene, which would appeal to modern viewers, who are used to action packed sequences. It could be argued that Shakespeare as a populariser in his own time, if born now, would have been at the forefront of such blockbusters.

Both Zeffirelli and Luhrmann exclude two main points that Shakespeare includes in his play. Firstly Mercutio’s death in the play is off stage.[58] Shakespeare may have done this to place less emphasis on Mercutio and more on Romeo and his reaction to Mercutio’s death, perhaps to draw the audience’s attention away from Mercutio, who could otherwise dominate the scene. Both directors felt it necessary to have Mercutio die on screen. A death scene does give added drama to the films; to take Mercutio off screen at that point could have caused the tension and the scene to fall flat, removing the sense of pace. Seeing Romeo grieve over Mercutio’s dead body spells out to the modern audience Romeo’s line of thought; it makes it obvious why he would turn to fighting when previously he refused,
showing that Romeo is not a cold blooded killer but someone the audience can feel sympathy for. Secondly, in the play, Tybalt returns to Romeo rather than Romeo running after him as he does in both films. This again is more dramatic, giving the directors the opportunity of having a chase scene, which allows the audience to see the build-up of Romeo’s hate and fury for Tybalt. It also emphasises the stark difference between the two fights. Romeo and Mercutio’s is wild, brutal and dangerous. Shakespeare obviously didn’t have the option of a chase Scene, having written his play to be performed on a stage with limited space. Instead Tybalt returns,[59] riling Romeo into the frenzy which drives him to kill.

Shakespeare is possibly the best-known playwright of our time. Most of his plays have been adapted for the big screen. However, critics have long been dismissive of the new media approach, arguing that it undermines his cultural status as high art that should not be discredited by adaptations. The critic Calavita disagrees, arguing that many literary theorists have created their own filmic canon in which they ‘want to set themselves and their preferred films apart from the juvenile, taste challenged masses […] according to the rules of good cinema from an imagined, Edenic-past.’[60] Even though Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet was, ‘the first Shakespeare film ever to lead all films in box office receipts during its open weekend’ it was ‘widely trashed by most critics upon its release’[61] for its use of ‘popular songs, glossy atmospherics and breakneck speed.’[62] Because of its popularity with the masses, the academic community shunned it. Similarly, Zeffirelli works to ‘revitalise the qualities that originally made the plays popular.’[63] The film industry is fast growing and in order to maintain the popularity of Shakespeare’s works and keep him, ‘not of an age but for all time’,[64] the film adaptations of Shakespeare, and particularly Romeo and Juliet, must be embraced, thus allowing motion picture to ‘for the first time in history render Shakespeare immortal.’[65] In Shakespeare’s words, ‘All the worlds a stage.’[66] His plays can be performed anywhere in any form and they will still be recognised as Shakespeare.