**Study Guide for *Romeo and Juliet* (*circa* 1591)**

**by William Shakespeare (1564-1616)**

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**Plot**

**A Very Short Summary**

Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is centred on the love between a young man (Romeo) and a thirteen year old girl (Juliet) who belong to two warring families, the Montagues and the Capulets. Their love ends tragically, and brings about the reconciliation of the two families following their deaths. All of the play’s events take place in less than a week: from Sunday morning until early Friday morning.

**Act One: Love and Hate in Verona**

**Scene One**

**The feud.** *Sunday morning.* Following a street fight between members of the Montague and Capulet family, the Prince of Verona declares that anyone who breaks the peace again will be executed.

**Romeo loves Rosaline.** *Sunday morning.* Benvolio, Romeo’s cousin, discovers that Romeo is lovesick over Rosaline, Lord Capulet’s niece.

**Scene Two**

**Paris’ proposal.** *Sunday afternoon.* Lord Capulet discusses Paris’ proposal of marriage to Juliet. He says Paris must wait another two years.

**The Capulet ball.** *Sunday evening.* Benvolio persuades Romeo to go to the Capulet ball to ‘examine other beauties’.

**Scene Three**

**Juliet obeys.** *Sunday evening*. Juliet agrees to obey her parents’ wishes and consider Paris’ proposal.

**Scene Four**

**Fate awaits**. *Sunday evening*. Romeo fears ‘some consequence yet hanging in the stars’, but goes to the Cpaulet ball anyway.

**Scene Five**

**Love and hate at first sight.** *Sunday evening.* At the Capulet ball, Romeo meets Juliet and immediately falls in love with her. Tybalt spots Romeo and vows revenge for his intrusion.

**Act Two: A Hasty Marriage**

**Scene One**

**Bawdy jokes.** *Sunday night.* Mercutio makes bawdy jokes about Romeo’s desire for Rosaline. He sees love in merely sexual terms.

**Scene Two**

**The ‘balcony scene’.** *Sunday night.* Romeo meets Juliet again by hiding in the Capulet orchard, beneath her window. They exchange professions of love.

**Scene Three**

**Friar Laurence agrees.** *Early Monday morning.* Friar Laurence agrees to marry Romeo and Juliet, hoping that this will end their parents’ feud.

**Scene Four**

**Tybalt’s challenge and marriage preparations**. *Monday: late morning and early afternoon.* The audience learns that Romeo has received a challenge from Tybalt. The Nurse makes arrangements for the secret marriage.

**Scene Five**

**The Nurse’s good news.** *Monday afternoon*. After teasing her for a while, the Nurse tells Juliet to go to Friar Laurence’s cell to be married to Romeo.

**Scene Six**

**The secret marriage.** *Monday afternoon*. After warning Romeo against excessive passion, Friar Laurence marries Romeo and Juliet.

**Act Three: Disaster Strikes**

**Scene One**

**Feuding, death and banishment.** *Monday afternoon and evening.* Tybalt insults Romeo. Romeo refuses the challenge, but Mercutio fights Tybalt and is killed. Romeo kills Tybalt in revenge and is banished from Verona.

**Scene Two**

**The Nurse’s bad news.** *Monday evening.* Juliet longs for her wedding night, only to told by the Nurse of Tybalt’s death and Romeo’s banishment. She despairs until the Nurse agrees to arrange a wedding night despite the disaster.

**Scene Three**

**The Friar’s bad news.** *Monday night.* Friar Laurence tells Romeo he is banished, but urges him to consummate his marriage before departing, assuring him that he will find a way of resolving the situation.

**Scene Four**

**Lord Capulet agrees.** *Tuesday morning.* Despite having no confirmation from Juliet, Lord Capulet rushes forward her marriage to Paris, presumably hoping to restore the honour of his family following the recent bloody events.

**Scene Five**

**Marriage to Paris.** *Tuesday morning.* Romeo leaves Juliet to go into exile following their wedding night. Lord Capulet insists that Juliet marry Paris, and is furious when she refuses, threatening to ‘drag’ her to church ‘on a hurdle’.

**Act Four: A Second Wedding Prevented**

**Scene One**

**The Friar’s plan.** *Tuesday.* Friar Laurence arranges for Juliet to drink a potion that will mean she appears to be dead, in order to avoid having to marry Paris.

**Scene Two**

**Juliet pretends**. *Tuesday evening*. Delighted that Juliet now agrees to marry Paris, Lord Capulet brings the wedding forwards to Wednesday morning.

**Scene Three**

**Juliet’s courage.** *Tuesday night*. Left alone on stage, Juliet shows great courage, inspired by her love for Romeo, and drinks the Friar’s potion.

**Scene Four**

**Hasty preparations**. *Early Wednesday morning*. Lord Capulet rushes around making final wedding preparations.

**Scene Five**

**The ‘dead’ bride.** *Wednesday morning*. Juliet is discovered, apparently dead. The wedding preparations are turned into funeral preparations.

**Act Five: The Tragic End**

**Scene One**

**Balthasar’s bad news.** *Thursday morning*. In Mantua, Romeo hears from Balthasar that Juliet is dead. He hastily sends Balthasar to hire post-horses, the fastest means of transport in Renaissance Italy. He buys poison, planning to die beside Juliet.

**Scene Two**

**The failed message.** *Thursday afternoon*. Friar Laurence hears from Friar John that his letter explaining the plan never reached Romeo, as Friar John was kept in quarantine in a house suspected of the plague.

**Scene Three**

**The tragic end of Romeo and Juliet.** *Thursday night and Friday morning.* Romeo encounters Paris at the Capulet tomb. They fight, and Romeo kills Paris. Romeo drinks the poison. Juliet wakes and, finding Romeo dead, she refuses to go with Friar Laurence, and stabs herself.

**The reconciliation.** *Friday morning.* The Montagues and Capulets, horrified at the result of their feuding, are reconciled.

**A More Detailed Plot Summary**

*All of the play’s events take place in less than a week: from Sunday morning until early Friday morning.*

**Act One: Love and Hate in Verona**

**Scene One**

*Sunday morning*

A street fight breaks out between the servants of the feuding families of Capulet and Montague. Benvolio, a Montague, tries to break up the fight, but is prevented by Tybalt, who forces him to join the fray. The elderly Lords Capulet and Montague also join the fight, despite their wives’ protests. Prince Escalus, the ruler of Verona, orders the opponents to part, and decrees that anyone who starts another street fight will be punished by execution.

Lord and Lady Montague ask Benvolio to find the cause of Romeo’s melancholy. Benvolio discovers that Romeo is suffering from unrequited love for Rosaline, the niece of Lord Capulet.

**Scene Two**

*Sunday afternoon*

Lord Capulet discusses Paris’ proposal of marriage to his daughter Juliet. He insists that Juliet is too young, and also that Paris should win her love before it goes ahead. He invites Paris to a feast he is holding and sends a servant to tell the other guests about it. The servant is illiterate, so asks Romeo to read the list of guests for him. Romeo and Benvolio thus discover that there is to be a great ball at the Capulet mansion, to which Rosaline is invited. Romeo agrees to go to the ball; Benvolio is hoping that the sight of so many beautiful young ladies will cure him of his hopeless passion for Rosaline.

**Scene Three**

*Sunday evening*

Lady Capulet tells Juliet of Paris’ proposal. Juliet meekly agrees to consider him as a potential husband.

**Scene Four**

*Sunday evening*

Romeo has had a dream, and fears ‘some consequence yet hanging in the stars’, but goes to the Capulet ball anyway. He takes a fatalistic attitude to what will happen there.

**Scene Five**

*Sunday evening*

Juliet’s meek attitude soon changes when Romeo comes to the Capulet ball, along with Mercutio and Benvolio. Romeo falls in love with her at first sight, and wins two kisses when he goes to speak with her. Romeo and Juliet are both distraught when they discover that they have fallen in love with the only child of their family’s chief enemy. Tybalt recognises Romeo’s voice and immediately wishes to fight with him for daring to attend the Capulet ball. However, Lord Capulet sternly rebukes Tybalt for wanting to start a fight at his party. Tybalt obeys Capulet, but is determined that Romeo will not go unpunished.

**Act Two: A Hasty Marriage**

**Scene One**

*Sunday night*

Unaware of Romeo’s change of heart, Mercutio makes bawdy jokes about Romeo’s desire for Rosaline. He sees love in merely sexual terms.

**Scene Two**

*Sunday night*

Romeo climbs into the Capulet orchard, determined to seek his newfound love despite the danger. Juliet speaks at a window, and Romeo listens, unseen, while she speaks of her love and her wish that Romeo cease to be a Montague and be free to love her. Their courtship proceeds rapidly, as Juliet cannot now hide the love she has already proclaimed, and Romeo returns it passionately. Juliet asks Romeo to send a message to her the next morning if he wishes to marry her.

**Scene Three**

*Monday morning*

Romeo goes to his confessor, Friar Laurence, and asks him to marry them. The Friar agrees, hoping that the marriage will bring about an end to the feud, but reprimands Romeo for his excessive, hasty passion.

**Scene Four**

*Monday, around noon*

Mercutio and Benvolio discuss the challenge that Tybalt has sent to Romeo by letter. Romeo arrives and they exchange witticisms. Juliet’s Nurse arrives, seeking Romeo, and is teased by Mercutio, who makes lewd remarks which offend her greatly. The Nurse is delighted to hear of the forthcoming marriage and wedding night, and enthusiastic in providing assistance to the young couple.

**Scene Five**

*Monday afternoon*

The Nurse returns to Juliet, and after some prevarication, tells her of Romeo’s plan to marry that day.

**Scene Six**

*Monday afternoon*

After warning Romeo against excessive passion, Friar Laurence marries Romeo and Juliet.

**Act Three: Disaster Strikes**

**Scene One**

*Monday afternoon*

Mercutio refuses to listen to Benvolio’s advice to keep off the streets and avoid quarrels with the Capulets. Tybalt arrives and Mercutio reacts angrily to his words, almost beginning a fight, before Romeo arrives and Tybalt turns his attention to him. Tybalt insults Romeo, but Romeo refuses to fight, protesting that he loves Tybalt. Angry at Romeo’s ‘dishonourable’ behaviour, Mercutio fights on Romeo’s behalf and is mortally wounded under Romeo’s arm when he tries to break up the fight. Tybalt flees. Mercutio dies offstage and Romeo vows revenge, which he carries out when Tybalt returns, killing him and then fleeing himself at Benvolio’s insistence. Benvolio recounts to the Prince and the assembled Montagues and Capulets what has happened. Despite Lady Capulet’s protests, the Prince accepts Benvolio’s account, and pronounces Romeo banished from Verona.

**Scene Two**

*Monday evening*

Meanwhile, Juliet is longing for the arrival of her husband, so that they can enjoy their wedding night. When her Nurse comes, however, she hears of the fight and her cousin Tybalt’s death. Nevertheless, she is determined to remain loyal to Romeo. Her Nurse goes to find Romeo at Laurence’s cell and send him to Juliet.

**Scene Three**

*Monday night*

At Laurence’s cell, Romeo refuses to listen to the Friar’s reasoning and gives himself up to passionate grief. The Nurse arrives and brings news of Juliet’s continued love, and Laurence urges Romeo to go to her and consummate the marriage before leaving for Mantua.

**Scene Four**

*Monday night*

Lord Capulet decides to hasten Juliet’s marriage to Paris, presumably hoping that the match will restore his family’s wounded honour. He promises Paris that they shall be married on Thursday, fully convinced that his daughter will obediently follow his decision.

**Scene Five**

*Tuesday morning*

After spending the night with Juliet, Romeo sadly parts from her into banishment. Having just consummated her union with Romeo, Juliet is told that she must marry Paris on Thursday morning. She refuses, and meets with fury from her father, who tells her she will be cast out into the streets to starve if she does not obey his will. The desperate Juliet gets no remedy from her Nurse, who simply tells her to marry a second time, pointing out that Paris is even more good looking than Romeo. Disgusted by this amoral advice, Juliet resolves to seek guidance from Friar Laurence.

**Act Four: A Second Wedding Prevented**

**Scene One**

*Tuesday*

Juliet arrives at Friar Laurence’s cell to find Paris there, and deftly deflects his questions and statements. Once Paris is gone, she shows how desperate she is at her situation, threatening to kill herself if Laurence cannot help her. Laurence proposes that, if she has the courage to kill herself, she could also have the courage to take a potion that will make her appear dead. She will then be taken to the Capulet tomb and laid there. When she awakes, he will reunite her with Romeo. Juliet enthusiastically agrees to the plan.

**Scene Two**

*Tuesday evening*

When Juliet returns home, she pretends to assent to her father’s will. He is so delighted that he hastens the marriage still further, determining that it shall be on Wednesday morning. Juliet must therefore take the potion that very night.

**Scene Three**

*Tuesday night*

Left alone on stage, Juliet shows great courage, inspired by her love for Romeo, and drinks the Friar’s potion.

**Scene Four**

*Early Wednesday morning*

Lord Capulet rushes around making final wedding preparations.

**Scene Five**

*Wednesday morning*

When the Nurse comes to waken Julet, she has apparently died in the night. Paris, who has come to claim his bride, laments the cruel loss. The family prepare to bury Juliet, changing all the merriments of marriage into the solemnity of funeral rites.

**Act Five: The Tragic End**

**Scene One**

*Thursday morning*

In Mantua, Romeo hears from Balthasar that Juliet is dead. He hastily sends Balthasar to hire post-horses, the fastest means of transport in Renaissance Italy. He also buys poison, planning to die beside Juliet.

**Scene Two**

*Thursday evening*

Friar Laurence learns that his letter never reached Romeo, because its bearer, Friar John, was imprisoned in a house suspected of the plague, and could not take it. Laurence determines to go to the Capulet tomb immediately to be there when Juliet awakes.

**Scene Three**

*Thursday night*

Paris has come to the churchyard where the Capulet tomb stands to show his devotion to the dead Juliet, but is disturbed in this by the arrival of Romeo. He tries to apprehend Romeo, thinking that he has come to desecrate the Capulet tomb. They fight, and Paris is killed. Before he dies, he requests that Romeo lay him beside Juliet. Romeo does so. He wonders at how Juliet’s beauty is untouched by death, not realising that this is because she only sleeps. He takes the poison and dies.

Friar Laurence arrives too late to prevent the calamity. Juliet wakes up and sees her love dead beside her, and refuses to leave the tomb with Laurence. He hears the city watch approaching, and flees, leaving Juliet alone with her dead husband. She tries to get some taste of the poison from his lips; when this fails, she stabs herself with his dagger and falls dead upon him.

*Friday morning*

The Prince, Lord and Lady Capulet, and Lord Montague, arrive to find a scene of desolation. Lord Montague explains that his wife has died from grief at Romeo’s banishment. Friar Laurence explains what happened and offers himself up for punishment, but the Prince refuses to chastise him. Capulet and Montague make peace, and promise to make golden statues of each other’s children, who have died as a result of their feuding.

**Setting**

**Renaissance Italy**

The play is set in Renaissance Italy. The exact date is not specified, but it is probably some time during the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. At this time, Italy was not a united country, but was divided up into various small states, each ruled by a different prince or duke. Therefore Prince Escalus is the absolute ruler of Verona, with power to make laws, to judge criminal cases and to pass death sentences.

**Verona**

Verona, where most of the play takes place, is a walled city. Cities had walls to protect them from bandits and enemy attacks, as the various small states in Italy frequently went to war with each other. When Romeo is banished to Mantua, he is physically shut out from his home by the walls, and utters the famous line, ‘there is no world without Verona walls’.

**Mantua**

Mantua is another Italian city, where Romeo goes when he is banished after killing Tybalt. It is twenty-five miles from Verona, but this distance would have taken much longer to travel in Renaissance Italy than in modern times. Even with fast horses, it would take at least five hours. Romeo sends Balthasar to ‘hire post-horses’ for the journey back to Verona, the fastest kind of transport, demonstrating his hasty and passionate nature.

**Italian Summer**

The play is set in July - about a fortnight before 1st August, which is Juliet’s birthday. The hot summer weather adds to the tense atmosphere in Verona. The young men are out and about, looking for a fight. As Benvolio says to Mercutio:

‘The day is hot, the Capulets abroad,

And, if we meet, we shall not scape a brawl;

For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.’

**Context**

**Catholic Culture**

All of the characters in the play are Catholics, as it is set in Renaissance Italy. There are many mentions of Catholic beliefs and practices. For example, Romeo and Juliet both go to confession to Friar Laurence. It is his position as their confessor which makes it possible for him to assist them in the way he does. Juliet’s parents are happy for her to go to confession after she has argued with them, little suspecting that Laurence is conspiring with Juliet to reunite her with her husband. Laurence’s determination that Romeo and Juliet’s marriage be consummated must be understood within the context of the Catholic belief that marriage, once consummated, is indissoluble. He hopes to make an unbreakable bond between the warring families, and so bring about an end to the feud.

Lord Capulet’s attempts to force Juliet to marry Paris must also be understood within the context of Catholic belief. It is simply impossible for Juliet to marry again. Also, it goes against Catholic teaching for a marriage to be forced. Although a marriage can be arranged, both parties must consent to the match, or it is not valid. Lord Capulet is thus acting tyrannically - abusing his power - when he threatens to ‘drag’ Juliet to church.

**Elizabethan Culture**

The culture of Shakespeare’s original audience was not predominantly Catholic, as it was actually illegal to be a Catholic under the rule of Elizabeth I, who reigned from 1558 to 1603. However, many aspects of Catholic belief and practice were maintained within the protestant religion created by Elizabeth I. In particular, marriage was still considered by almost everyone to be indissoluble; divorce was not an option.

Other aspects of Elizabethan culture were not particularly related to Christianity, but were simply traditional beliefs shared by the vast majority of humanity until very recently. All human societies have traditionally believed that children should obey their parents, for example, so Shakespeare’s audience would not have been surprised at Capulet’s reaction to Juliet’s disobedience.

**Monarchical Government**

Like Elizabethan England, Verona is ruled by a monarch, Prince Escalus. It is not a democracy. Prince Escalus has the ultimate say in judging criminal cases, and his decision is final, as we see in his judgement of Romeo, and earlier in the play, when he threatens execution to anyone who disturbs the streets of his city again.

**Corporal and Capital Punishment**

As in most human societies throughout history, the punishments that are used in Renaissance Verona are physical. They involve inflicting physical pain (as when the Prince threatens ‘torture’ to anyone who does not stop fighting immediately in Act One Scene One) and execution for more serious offences.

In Elizabethan England, imprisonment or monetary fines were very rare, and likely only to be used for the wealthiest and most important criminals. Punishments were also usually public. Elizabethans would have been puzzled by the idea of executing a criminal privately; they would have assumed that a large part of the point of the execution was to deter other criminals, and doing it publicly obviously contributes to this goal. Shakespeare’s original audience would have had a choice on most days of which form of ‘entertainment’ they preferred: they could pay to see a play, or they could watch an execution for free.

**Characters**

**Montague Household**

**Lord Montague**

Although his role in Verona is very significant, Romeo’s father plays little part in the play. He is concerned about his son at the start and sends Benvolio to investigate. He pleads on Romeo’s behalf after Romeo kills Tybalt. We do therefore see that he has a fatherly concern for his son, but this is much less important than Lord Capulet’s role in the play, as Romeo, as a man, can act with little parental constraint.

**Lady Montague**

Lady Montague’s role in the play is even smaller than her husband’s. Her most prominent moment is when we hear of her death from grief following Romeo’s banishment.

**Romeo**

Romeo is the only son of Lord Montague, the head of the Montague family. He is a fiery and passionate young man who begins the play in love with Rosaline, but falls in love at first sight with Juliet when he sees her at the Capulet ball. He makes rapid, emotional decisions. This could be seen as his tragic flaw. If only he had waited longer to hear from Friar Laurence, events might have turned out very differently.

**Benvolio**

Benvolio is Romeo’s cousin and close friend. He is an exception among the young male characters in the play, as he shows a great degree of temperance and a strong desire to make peace and avoid conflict. His calm and responsible character means that he is trusted by those in authority. The Prince, for example, is willing to listen to his version of events following the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, despite Lady Capulet’s protests that he cannot be trusted as a Montague.

**Balthasar**

Balthasar is Romeo’s personal servant. He is involved in the fight at the start of the play. He later brings Romeo news of Juliet’s supposed death and accompanies him to the graveyard where the Capulet tomb stands.

**Abraham**

Abraham is a servant of the house of Montague. His only role in the play is to take part in the street fight at its opening.

**Capulet Household**

**Lord Capulet**

Lord Capulet is Juliet’s father. At first, he appears quite reasonable, pointing out to Paris that Juliet is too young to marry, and urging Paris to woo her, as he wants her to marry willingly, not under his command. But later, after he has changed his mind and hastened the marriage following Tybalt’s death, he becomes enraged when his daughter crosses his will, and threatens to throw her out on the streets if she does not obey him. Like most of the male characters in the play, he becomes aggressive when his honour is at stake, and he cannot bear to think that he will not be able to keep his promise to Paris.

**Lady Capulet**

Lady Capulet has a somewhat distant relationship with her daughter Juliet in comparison to the intimacy which the Nurse enjoys. Her main role in the play is to try to persuade Juliet to marry Paris. At first, Juliet is happy to follow her mother’s wishes, but when she resists them, her mother quickly abandons her to her father’s wrath, showing a coldness and lack of love which leads the audience to question how genuine her grief is when Juliet is supposed dead.

**Juliet**

Juliet is the only daughter of Lord Capulet, the head of the Capulet family. At the start of the play, she is meek and submissive to her parents’ wishes, but this soon changes when she falls in love with Romeo. She shows great courage and independence of mind when she undertakes to follow Friar Laurence’s plan in order to avoid marrying Paris, but in the end, like Romeo, she is destroyed by her own excessive passion, refusing to remain alive when she sees that her love is dead.

**Tybalt**

Tybalt is Juliet’s cousin, and the most aggressive character in the play. At his first appearance, he asserts that he hates the very word ‘peace’. He is furious when Romeo comes to the Capulet ball, taking it as a personal insult, and issues a challenge to Romeo afterwards. Despite Romeo’s attempts to make peace, he is determined to fight him, and ends up dying at his hands.

**The Nurse**

Juliet’s Nurse is the most important person in her life at the start of the play, taking the role of mother in many respects. She breastfed her when she was a baby, and has stayed with her ever since. The Nurse is not like a mother in some respects, however. She acts more in the role of a friend when she helps Juliet arrange her secret marriage, and later her wedding night, with Romeo. The Nurse lacks clear moral principles. She shows a very strong interest in sex rather than love, focusing mostly on the physical appearance of young men, and does not scruple to suggest to Juliet that she should marry a second time when this seems the most convenient course of action. At this point, Juliet rejects and condemns her, though not to her face, and turns instead to Friar Laurence for guidance.

**Peter, Samson and Gregory**

Peter is the Nurse’s servant. Samson and Gregory are servants of the house of Capulet who get involved in the street fight in Act One Scene One.

**The Ruling Family of Verona**

**Prince Escalus**

The Prince rules with authority, and is quite willing to threaten with torture or death those who disobey his commands. He is a stern character, but shows that he is willing to consider mitigating circumstances when he commutes Romeo’s death sentence into banishment. He is determined to bring the feud to an end, but finally succeeds in this only after the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, along with two of his own kinsmen, Mercutio and Paris.

**Mercutio**

Mercutio is a kinsman of the Prince, and a close friend of Romeo. He is a lively and quick-witted character, full of fun, but also more than ready to engage in fighting when he considers honour to be at stake. He is disgusted at Romeo’s refusal to accept Tybalt’s challenge, and ends up paying with his life for taking up the quarrel on behalf of his friend.

**Count Paris**

Paris is a kinsman of the Prince, a great nobleman, and the husband the Capulets have chosen for their daughter. He is eager to marry Juliet as soon as possible, but knows that the marriage cannot go ahead without her father’s consent. After Juliet’s supposed death, he continues to show his love for her by visiting the Capulet tomb, which leads to conflict with the desperate Romeo, and his death. Shakespeare creates a contrast between Paris and Romeo throughout the play. Paris always stands for the conventional and accepted way of doing things, while Romeo follows secret, unconventional, and ultimately desperate paths.

**Other Characters**

**Friar Laurence**

Friar Laurence is a Franciscan friar and priest. He is arguably the third most important character in the play because of his unique role in the plot. As a priest, he has contact with both of the feuding families, and he hopes to end the feud by secretly marrying Romeo and Juliet and thus creating an unbreakable bond between the antagonists. He shows great determination and intelligence when he tries to avert Juliet’s marriage to Paris, but the tragic miscarriage of his clever plan leads the audience to question whether there might have been a simpler and less risky way of resolving matters.

**Friar John**

Friar John, another Franciscan friar, is given the mission of taking Friar Laurence’s letter to Romeo in Mantua, which proves impossible after he is imprisoned in a house suspected of the plague.

**The Apothecary**

The apothecary (chemist) agrees to sell Romeo a powerful poison, despite the threat of execution for this crime. His poverty makes him desperate and willing to break the law.

**Themes**

**Love**

The love of Romeo and Juliet is passionate, and this makes it dangerous. The Friar advises them that they must be more moderate or their passion will be destructive. Nevertheless, he takes advantage of their youthful passion as part of his plan to bring an end to the feud between their families. Another perspective on love comes from Juliet’s Nurse, and from Mercutio, who focus almost entirely on its physical aspect, making many sexual references. Perhaps it is this superficial perspective which allows the Nurse so easily to recommend a second marriage to Paris.

**Passion**

A passion is an all-consuming emotion which can overcome reason, and, if not controlled, can lead people to act irrationally, almost as if they are mad. Love is not the only passion which drives the characters of the play to act hastily and without pausing to reflect. Other passions which drive them are anger and grief.

**Faith**

All of the characters in the play are Catholics, but the degree to which they practise Catholic teaching is highly variable. They are not, for example, very willing to apply Catholic teaching about forgiveness and loving one’s enemies. Friar Laurence is the chief representative of the Catholic Church, and tries to moderate the passions of the young lovers through reminding them of Catholic moral teaching. But Romeo and Juliet are more devoted to the religion of romantic love, as is clear from Juliet’s description of Romeo as ‘the god of my idolatry’.

**Family**

Family is considered of paramount importance to the citizens of Renaissance Verona, as it would have been to Shakespeare’s Elizabethan audience. They would be disturbed by Juliet’s idea that it is possible to deny one’s family in order to pursue one’s individual passion.

**Loyalty**

Romeo and Juliet face a divided loyalty. By pursuing their love, they are being disloyal to their families. Once married, they are determined to be loyal to each other.

**Authority**

The most important authority figures in the play are Lord Capulet and Prince Escalus. Both demand obedience from those under their authority, and threaten with punishment those who disobey. Friar Laurence is also an authority figure, taking a fatherly, guiding role towards both Romeo and Juliet.

**Obedience**

Juliet is at first meekly obedient to her parents’ wish that she marry Paris, but when she is carried away by her passion for Romeo, she quickly forgets about this, and tries to resist her father’s will, which infuriates him. Daughters would ordinarily have been expected to obey their fathers in Elizabethan England as well as Renaissance Verona.

**Honour**

All of the male characters consider it their duty to defend their honour. If they or their family is insulted, they must fight the man who insults them, or else be considered a coward and disgraced. This belief is a key reason why the feuding continues. It is considered cowardice not to fight for one’s honour. The Catholic teaching of forgiveness is thus almost completely ignored.

**Revenge**

Revenge is even more widely supported than honour. Whilst they are, at times, not so keen to defend honour as the men, the women do join them in thinking that a death in the family must be avenged. For example, Lady Capulet cheerfully explains to Juliet that they can arrange for Romeo to be poisoned in revenge for the killing of Tybalt.

**Justice**

Closely connected to the theme of revenge is that of justice. Revenge is a kind of rough justice - a paying back with equal scales, life for life. When Tybalt is slain, Lady Capulet demands that Romeo’s life be taken too. When the Prince only banishes him, she evidently thinks that she herself must organise for justice to be done, by having him murdered.

**Fate**

In ancient, pre-Christian times, characters in tragic plays were portrayed as being doomed. Their destiny, or fate, had been decided beforehand by higher powers, and there was nothing they could do to prevent their lives ending tragically. However, Shakespeare, as a Christian author, maintains a tension between this sense of destiny and the Christian belief in free will. According to Christian teaching, the future has not been decided beforehand, but is determined by our free choices. The tantalising possibility that things could have turned out differently makes the tragic end of the play all the more poignant. If Romeo had been less hasty in his resolve to die with Juliet, might he have waited long enough to see her wake, and so realised that she was not dead after all? Or might he have waited to hear more from Friar Laurence?

**Key Quotations**

*In British English, ‘quote’ is a verb. The abstract noun is ‘quotation’.*

*Not all scenes contain key quotations, but all are listed in this table to keep clear the sequence of events.*

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| **Quotation** | **Character** | **Theme / Setting** |
| **Prologue** |  |  |
| **1.** ‘ancient grudge’ |  | Honour / Revenge |
| **2.** ‘From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life’ | Romeo / Juliet | Fate |
| **3.** ‘death-mark’d love’ | Romeo / Juliet | Love / Fate |
| **Act One: Love and Hate in Verona** |  |  |
| **Scene One: The feud** |  |  |
| **4.** I.1 ‘I do but keep the peace’ | Benvolio | Honour |
| **5.** I.1 ‘What, drawn, and talk of peace! I hate the word,  As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee’ | Tybalt | Honour / Family |
| **6.** I.1 ‘If ever you disturb our streets again,  Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace.’ | Prince Escalus | Authority |
| **Scene One: Romeo loves Rosaline** |  |  |
| **7.** I.1 ‘Examine other beauties.’ | Benvolio to Romeo | Love |
| **Scene Two: Paris’ proposal** |  |  |
| **8.** I.2 ‘But woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart,  My will to her consent is but a part’ | Capulet to Paris | Authority / Obedience |
| **Scene Three: Juliet obeys** |  |  |
| **9.** I.3 ‘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.’ | Juliet to Lady Capulet | Love / Obedience |
| **10.** I.3 ‘Go, girl, seek happy nights to happy days.’ | Nurse | Love |
| **Scene Four: Fate awaits** |  |  |
| **11.** I.4 ‘my mind misgives  Some consequence yet hanging in the stars’ | Romeo | Fate |
| **12.** I.4 ‘But He, that hath the steerage of my course,  Direct my sail!’ | Romeo | Fate |
| **Scene Five: Love and hate at first sight** |  |  |
| **13.** I.5 ‘Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!  For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.’ | Romeo | Love |
| **14.** I.5 ‘Now, by the stock and honour of my kin,  To strike him dead, I hold it not a sin.’ | Tybalt | Honour / Revenge |
| **15.** I.5 ‘He shall be endured: [ . . . ]  Am I the master here, or you? go to.’ | Capulet to Tybalt | Authority / Obedience |
| **16.** I.5 ‘I will withdraw: but this intrusion shall  Now seeming sweet, convert to bitt’rest gall.’ | Tybalt | Obedience / Revenge |
| **17.** I.5 ‘My only love sprung from my only hate!’ | Juliet | Love / Family / Loyalty |
| **Act Two: A Hasty Marriage** |  |  |
| **Scene One: Bawdy jokes** |  |  |
| **18.** II.1 ‘Romeo! humours! madman! passion! lover!’ | Mercutio to Romeo | Love / Passion |
| **Scene Two: The ‘balcony scene’** |  |  |
| **19.** II.2 ‘He jests at scars that never felt a wound’ | Romeo | Love |
| **20.** II.2 ‘But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?  It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.’ | Romeo | Love |
| **21.** II.2 ‘O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?  Deny thy father and refuse thy name’ | Juliet | Love / Family / Loyalty |
| **22.** II.2 ‘Romeo, doff thy name,  And for that name which is no part of thee  Take all myself.’ | Juliet | Love / Family / Loyalty |
| **23.** II.2 ‘Call me but love, and I'll be new baptised;  Henceforth I never will be Romeo.’ | Romeo to Juliet | Love / Family / Loyalty |
| **24.** II.2 ‘what love can do that dares love attempt;  Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me.’ | Romeo to Juliet | Love / Passion |
| **25.** II.2 ‘swear by thy gracious self,  Which is the god of my idolatry’ | Juliet to Romeo | Love / Faith |
| **26.** II.2 ‘all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay  And follow thee my lord throughout the world.’ | Juliet to Romeo | Love |
| **Scene Three: Friar Laurence agrees** |  |  |
| **27.** II.3 ‘Is Rosaline, whom thou didst love so dear,  So soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies  Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes.’ | Laurence to Romeo | Love / Passion |
| **28.** II.3 ‘O, she [Rosaline] knew well  Thy love did read by rote and could not spell.’ | Laurence to Romeo | Love |
| **29.** II.3 ‘For this alliance may so happy prove,  To turn your households' rancour to pure love.’ | Laurence to Romeo | Love / Family |
| **30.** II.3 ‘Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast’ | Laurence to Romeo | Love / Passion |
| **Scene Four: Tybalt’s challenge and marriage preparations** |  |  |
| **Scene Five: The Nurse’s good news** |  |  |
| **31.** II.5 ‘I am the drudge and toil in your delight,  But you shall bear the burden soon at night’ | Nurse to Juliet | Love |
| **Scene Six: The secret marriage** |  |  |
| **32.** II.6 ‘These violent delights have violent ends  And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,  Which as they kiss consume [ . . . ]  Therefore love moderately’ | Laurence to Romeo | Love / Passion |
| **33.** II.6 ‘by your leaves, you shall not stay alone  Till Holy Church incorporate two in one’ | Laurence to Romeo and Juliet | Love / Faith |
| **Act Three: Disaster Strikes** |  |  |
| **Scene One: Feuding, death and banishment** |  |  |
| **34.** III.1 ‘if we meet, we shall not scape a brawl;  For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.’ | Benvolio to Mercutio | Honour / Passion  Summer |
| **35.** III.1 ‘Either withdraw unto some private place,  And reason coldly of your grievances,  Or else depart’ | Benvolio to Mercutio and Tybalt | Honour / Passion |
| **36.** III.1 ‘Boy, this shall not excuse the injuries  That thou hast done me; therefore turn and draw.’ | Tybalt to Romeo | Honour / Revenge |
| **37.** III.1 ‘good Capulet,--which name I tender  As dearly as my own,--be satisfied.’ | Romeo to Tybalt | Honour / Family |
| **38.** III.1 ‘O calm, dishonourable, vile submission!’ | Mercutio | Honour |
| **39.** III.1 ‘A plague o' both your houses!  They have made worms' meat of me’ | Mercutio | Family |
| **40.** III.1 ‘O sweet Juliet,  Thy beauty hath made me effeminate’ | Romeo | Honour |
| **41.** III.1 ‘This day's black fate’ | Romeo | Fate |
| **42.** III.1 ‘fire-eyed fury be my conduct now!’ | Romeo | Revenge / Passion |
| **43.** III.1 ‘Prince, as thou art true,  For blood of ours, shed blood of Montague.’ | Lady Capulet | Revenge / Justice |
| **44.** III.1 ‘Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill.’ | Prince | Justice |
| **Scene Two: The Nurse’s bad news** |  |  |
| **45.** III.2 ‘O, I have bought the mansion of a love,  But not possess'd it’ | Juliet | Love |
| **46.** III.2 ‘Ah, poor my lord, what tongue shall smooth thy name,  When I, thy three-hours wife, have mangled it?’ | Juliet | Love / Loyalty |
| **47.** III.2 ‘I'll to my wedding-bed;  And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!’ | Juliet | Love / Passion |
| **Scene Three: The Friar’s bad news** |  |  |
| **48.** III.3 ‘Ha, banishment! be merciful, say 'death;'’  ‘There is no world without Verona walls’ | Romeo | Love / Passion  Verona |
| **49.** III.3 ‘thy wild acts denote  The unreasonable fury of a beast’ | Laurence to Romeo | Love / Passion |
| **50.** III.3 ‘Go, get thee to thy love, as was decreed’ | Laurence to Romeo | Love / Faith |
| **Scene Four: Lord Capulet agrees** |  |  |
| **51.** III.4 ‘I think she will be ruled  In all respects by me; nay, more, I doubt it not’ | Capulet to Paris | Authority / Obedience |
| **Scene Five: Marriage to Paris** |  |  |
| **52.** III.5 ‘go with Paris to Saint Peter's Church,  Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither.’  ‘my fingers itch’  ‘hang, beg, starve, die in the streets’ | Capulet to Juliet | Authority / Obedience |
| **53.** III.5 ‘Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee.’ | Lady Capulet to Juliet |  |
| **Act Four: A Second Wedding Prevented** |  |  |
| **Scene One: The Friar’s plan** |  |  |
| **54.** IV.1 ‘I long to die’ | Juliet to Laurence | Love / Passion |
| **55.** IV.1 ‘I will do it without fear or doubt,  To live an unstain'd wife to my sweet love’ | Juliet to Laurence | Love / Loyalty |
| **Scene Two: Juliet pretends** |  |  |
| **Scene Three: Juliet’s courage** |  |  |
| **56.** IV.3: ‘Romeo [ . . . ] I drink to thee!’ | Juliet | Love |
| **Scene Four: Hasty preparations** |  |  |
| **Scene Five: The ‘dead’ bride** |  |  |
| **57.** IV.5: ‘My child, my only life,  Revive, look up, or I will die with thee!’ | Lady Capulet |  |
| **Act Five: The Tragic End** |  |  |
| **Scene One: Balthasar’s bad news** |  |  |
| **58.** V.1 ‘I defy you, stars!’ | Romeo | Fate |
| **59.** V.1 ‘sir, have patience:  Your looks are pale and wild’ | Balthasar to Romeo | Passion |
| **Scene Two: The failed message** |  |  |
| **Scene Three: The tragic end** |  |  |
| **60.** V.3 ‘my intents are savage-wild  More fierce and more inexorable far  Than empty tigers or the roaring sea.’ | Romeo to Balthasar | Passion |
| **61.** V.3 ‘shake the yoke of inauspicious stars  From this world-wearied flesh’ | Romeo | Fate / Passion |
| **62.** V.3 ‘A greater power than we can contradict  Hath thwarted our intents’ | Laurence to Juliet | Fate |
| **Scene Three: The reconciliation** |  |  |
| **63.** V.3 ‘Capulet! Montague!  See, what a scourge is laid upon your hate  [ . . . ] all are punish’d’ | Prince to Capulet and Montague | Justice |