

# myShakespeare's

## *Romeo and Juliet*

Curriculum Guide

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## Tips and Tricks for Teaching *Romeo and Juliet*

### In the Beginning...

#### ***Poll the Class***

- What do you know about Shakespeare? When did he live and what was his world like? What are some of the plays you have read or heard of?
- Have you seen any of Shakespeare's plays performed? Have you seen any film versions or adaptations of Shakespeare's plays (i.e. Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, etc.)? Have you ever performed anything written by Shakespeare?
- What do you know about Shakespeare's language? Are iambic pentameter, prose, and verse familiar or unfamiliar terms? Do you know any famous quotes from Shakespeare? If so, what do you think they mean?
- What do you know about *Romeo and Juliet*? Any famous lines? Plot points? Characters? Where is it set, and when? What are some themes of *Romeo and Juliet*?
- What are your anxieties about Shakespeare? Is there anything that has confused you in past attempts to study Shakespeare? Is there anything that you're dreading as you embark on *Romeo and Juliet*?

#### ***Play Around with the Text: A Sneaky Shakespeare Exercise***

- Distribute the first 13 lines of dialogue in *Romeo and Juliet* to students. Work through the text as a class to unlock any unfamiliar phrases.
- Divide the class in half, into a "Team Sampson" and "Team Gregory." Have students select from a pile of index cards listing "secret styles," such as horror, western, detective, opera, soap opera, sit-com, musical, farce, and so on.
- Have the class exchange dialogue in this style, either as a group or student-by-student down the line. Encourage students to go big—this is Shakespeare!
- At the end of the exercise, re-group and have students guess Shakespeare's intended setting and style for the scene. Perform the scene in this style.

#### ***Pre-Detecting: Interpreting Key Lines out of Context***

- Distribute a worksheet of 5-8 key lines you choose from Act 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*.
- Read each line aloud. Who do you imagine is speaking the line—a man or woman, someone old or young, powerful or weak, good or evil? Human or supernatural? To whom (or what) is he or she speaking? Have students write their ideas under each quote.

## Throughout the Play...

### **Weird Word Log**

- Select ten archaic or unusual words from your students' first reading assignment and have students guess meanings, first by the word alone, then by interpreting it in context.
- Have students create a Weird Word Log to keep track of unusual words as they continue to work through the play. For each word, students may wish to write a definition or synonym and write and illustrate a sentence of their own that employs the word.

### **Character Bookmarks**

- Distribute index cards to students, along with copies of the Dramatis Personae.
- Discuss the cast list with your students, with an eye towards relationships and social status.
- Then have students depict the characters on their bookmarks based on what they've inferred from the Dramatis Personae.
- On the back, students can list character traits as they learn them, and continue to use these cards as a reference throughout the play.
- Remind your students that they can view the character blurbs for each scene, which might help them deduce what's important for each character as they move through the play.

## In-Class Activities and Ideas

*The following are brief overviews of general exercises that may enhance your students' experience. They can be adapted for use at any point in the play, depending on your curricular needs.*

### **Staging *Romeo and Juliet***

As your students work through the play, ask them to generate ideas for staging the particular sections of the text you're reading. Some reliably interesting moments include:

- [The fight between the Montagues and the Capulets in 1.1](#)
- [Romeo and Mercutio's banter \(including the Queen Mab speech\) in 1.4](#)
- [Romeo and Juliet's first meeting in 1.5](#)
- [The balcony scene \(2.2\)](#)
- [Mercutio's and Tybalt's deaths in 3.1](#)
- [The final scene at the Capulet tomb \(5.3\)](#)

Once you've generated some ideas, show your students the corresponding performance videos from myShakespeare (at the links above). Discuss the following questions with your students:

- myShakespeare uses intimate, direct-to-camera staging. What is the effect of this choice on the viewer? How does it impact your understanding of the words?
- What are some other staging options for these scenes? Do certain staging ideas suggest different emphases? Different points of view? Different moods or atmospheres?
- What is conveyed by the staging ideas you have generated and by the film representation you have seen?
- Do you feel that some scenes can be dramatized more effectively through one medium or the other?

NOTE: This exercise can be easily expanded into a filmmaking or performance exercise using the same section of text (see Culminating Essays and Projects).

## How Do Actors Convey Meaning and Tone?

*The following activity is adapted from Reading Shakespeare with Young Adults by Mary Ellen Dakin.*

Distribute copies of a famous speech from the play to students. Some suggestions include

- [The Nurse's speech in 1.3](#)
- [Mercutio's Queen Mab speech in 1.4](#)
- [Romeo and Juliet's speeches in the balcony scene \(2.2\)](#)
- [Juliet's "fiery-footed steeds" speech in 3.2](#)
- [Romeo's complaint to Friar Laurence in 3.3](#)
- [Juliet's soliloquy in 4.3](#)
- [Romeo's soliloquy in 5.1](#)
- [Romeo's final speech in 5.3](#)
- [Friar Laurence's final speech in 5.3](#)

First, have the students highlight words and phrases that appeal to any of the five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. Then, have them underline and label examples of personification. Finally, ask your students to read the passage aloud. Once your students have completed these steps, discuss the following questions:

- How does the passage sound? Do you hear a rhythm? Are the words soft and musical, or harsh and discordant?
- What is the mood of this speech? how do the imagery and personification contribute to the mood?

After the discussion, screen the corresponding myShakespeare scene (at the links above) for your students, asking them to keep in mind their earlier conclusions about the speech. Once they've viewed the scene, your students should discuss the following questions:

- How does the actor use his or her voice as a performance tool? What kinds of choices in the sounds of their voices are the actors making, and how do those choices affect the meaning of the text?
- What else does the actor do to add meaning and emotion to these words? How does he or she use gestures, facial expressions, body language, and movement to enrich the words?
- How do the camera shots and angles contribute to the drama of the scene?

## You Be the Host

With this exercise, your students will have the chance to step into Ralph's shoes. First have your students view a few examples of our character interviews for scenes they've already ready.

Then, have them choose a scene that might make for an interesting interview. You might have them choose a scene that does not feature a myShakespeare interview, or to interview a character who doesn't get as much interview time in the hot seat. Some options include

- [Act 4, Scene 4](#)
- [Act 5, Scene 2](#)
- Paris
- The Prince
- The Montagues

First, students should draft a set of questions to ask the character. They should consider:

- How the character might be feeling in this scene.
- What does the character want at this point in the play?
- What might the character be hiding, and how can Ralph get them to reveal it?
- What thematic kinds of questions could Ralph ask to help a viewer better understand the play?

Once your students have drafted scripts, the options are endless. They can stage a live interview for the class, film it studio-style, or even create podcast radio interviews.

## Act-by-Act Resources

### Act I

#### Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts

*For each act, many of the discussion questions and writing prompts are the subject of our character interviews, so we recommend showing students the interviews as preparation. The questions begin as brief, basic discussion questions for in-class conversation or short writing assignments, and build to more complex questions for deeper discussions or longer essays. Each prompt is designed to be adaptable for your classroom needs.*

#### A Few Basic Questions...

- How does the play set a tone of tension *and* humor?
- How would you describe Romeo's feelings for Rosaline?
- What do the secondary characters think of our protagonists, Romeo and Juliet? How can you tell?
- Does the conflict between the Montagues and Capulets seem justified?

#### Digging Deeper...

##### ***The Prince's Decree***

Review the [Prince's speech to the Montagues and the Capulets in 1.1](#). How does he decide to handle their conflict? Do you agree with his decision? Do you think his solution for diffusing the tension will be successful? Why or why not? What would you have done if you were in the Prince's position?

##### ***Who Is Romeo?***

We don't meet Romeo until the end of the first scene—but we hear about him first. Based on the Montagues' description of him, what are you expecting? When he does appear, does Romeo's character match those expectations? Based on his introduction, does his love for Rosaline seem genuine? Why or why not?

##### ***A Love Letter***

A little research goes a long way. After reviewing the conventions of love story, and the literary trope of the unrequited lover, try writing a love poem from Romeo to Rosaline. What might he praise about her? What tone would the poem strike? Feel free to use Shakespeare's sonnets for inspiration.

##### ***The Nurse Misspeaks***

The [Nurse's speech in 1.3](#) is one of the comedic highlights of the play. Try going through the speech to find all the funny—malapropisms, innuendo, etc. How would you describe the Nurse's humor? Is any of it intentional, or is it funny because she misspeaks? How does her manner and style speaking indicate her social class? Are there other cues in the scene?

### ***Drawing Queen Mab***

[Mercutio's famous Queen Mab speech](#) uses a great deal of visual imagery. Using our popup notes for guidance, try breaking it down, image by image, and sketching each one. Or perhaps make a collage, including all of the images you can, while also evoking the meaning and tone of the speech. Does visualizing the speech help you understand its obscure contents? Do the contents of the speech make you reconsider Romeo's love for Rosaline (and eventual love for Juliet) in any way?

### ***The Lovers Meet***

At last, Romeo and Juliet meet in 1.5. What do you make of their first encounter? How does Romeo describe Juliet when he first sees her? Does the fact that Romeo so swiftly forgets Rosaline make his love for Juliet seem less or more genuine? How does Juliet respond to Romeo's flirtatious advances? After discussing their conversation, try rewriting it—in a modern setting. If this conversation were to take place between two 21st-century teens, what might it look like? Where would it take place—in person, or perhaps via text or Snapchat? Try exchanging their poetic language with contemporary slang, too. What challenges arise as you complete this task? How does modern language change the tone and effect of the words?

## **Act II**

### **Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts**

#### **A Few Basic Questions...**

- What prompts Romeo to sneak into the Capulets' orchard? What is he hoping to achieve in meeting Juliet again?
- Why doesn't Juliet trust Romeo's declarations of love at first? What causes her hesitation?
- Why do you think the Nurse supports Romeo and Juliet's relationship? Why does Friar Laurence?
- What's the rush? Why do Romeo and Juliet want to get married so hastily?

#### **Digging Deeper...**

### ***Juliet and the Nurse***

In [Act 2, Scene 2](#), Romeo and Juliet make plans to marry. And in [Scene 4](#), the Nurse tracks down Romeo to confirm those plans. Somewhere between, Juliet has clued the Nurse in on her plans and convinced her to help, but we never get to see that conversation. Given what students know about Juliet, the Nurse,



and their relationship, students should write a dialogue in which Juliet informs the Nurse of her plans to marry Romeo, and convinces her to help. Would the Nurse have hesitations? What might they be?

### ***On the Outside Looking in***

Romeo's got Mercutio and Benvolio, masters of witty repartee. And Juliet has... the Nurse. All three secondary characters provide perspective on Romeo and Juliet's behavior, but they do so in very different ways. Using [2.2](#) and [2.4](#) as inspiration, try comparing and contrasting their attitudes toward Romeo and Juliet's relationship. One option is to put these three characters in a room with Ralph or Sarah and have them all interviewed at once—how would they interact? What would they say? How would Benvolio and Mercutio react when they hear about Romeo's new infatuation with Juliet? Do they take this relationship seriously? And what's at stake for each of them?

### ***Imagine the Wedding***

The hastily arranged wedding of Romeo and Juliet happens off-stage. At the [end of Act 2](#), we see them leaving to perform the ceremony, but we don't actually get to see the ceremony. Have the students review the character interviews from Act 2, focusing in particular on the interviews with Romeo and Juliet, the Nurse, and the Friar. Then try creatively imagining the ceremony. What would Romeo and Juliet each say in their vows? What might the Nurse and Friar Laurence say in their wedding toasts?

## **Act III**

### **Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts**

#### **A Few Basic Questions...**

- Why is Mercutio so willing to fight Tybalt? What does he have at stake in this confrontation?
- What do you think of Romeo's exile? Is that a fair punishment for Romeo's supposed crime?
- How does Friar Laurence's plan of reconciling the Montagues and the Capulets through Romeo and Juliet's marriage seem to be working so far?
- Why are the Capulet's so frustrated with Juliet's behavior? Why are they so eager to marry her off to Paris?

#### **Digging Deeper...**

##### ***Fight Choreography***

The deadly scuffle between Mercutio, Tybalt, and Romeo occurs without much stage direction from Shakespeare. Using clues from the [dialogue in Act 3, Scene 1](#), students should try their hand at choreographing the fight for performance. Where would they position the actors? What would the fight look like? How long would it last?

##### ***Romeo on Trial***

At the end of Act 3, Scene 1, the Prince banishes Romeo from Verona as punishment for Tybalt's death. Is that punishment fair? Wise? Just? Have your students put Romeo on trial, and determine a punishment they feel is most appropriate, given the circumstances of Tybalt's death. For evidence, they should use dialogue and stage direction from [Act 3, Scene 1](#). Feel free to break students into groups—defense and prosecution. Consider appointing one student the judge, who will be responsible for giving the verdict and the sentence, after hearing the cases of both sides.

### **Storyboarding Speeches**

Act 3 features two speeches that contain a great deal of visual imagery: [Juliet's speech in 3.2](#), while waiting for the Nurse to return. [Friar Laurence's speech to Romeo in 3.3](#), telling him to "Hold thy desperate hand." Have students choose a speech, select specific lines to illustrate, then draw 10-20 successive images creating a short film sequence for these lines, paying particular attention to metaphors and imagery. The more specific images you can come up with, the better!

## **Act IV**

### **Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts**

#### **A Few Basic Questions...**

- Why doesn't Juliet inform the Nurse of her plans to fake her own death, when she has confided in the Nurse before?
- What do their arguments reveal about Juliet and Capulet's relationship? What are Juliet's responsibilities as a daughter, and what are Capulet's as a father?
- What is Juliet's state of mind at the end of Act 4, Scene 3? Why does she decide to move forward with her plan?

#### **Digging Deeper...**

##### ***Capulet's Performance***

myShakespeare provides two different performances of Capulet's speech upon hearing of Juliet's death in 4.5—a "stunned version" and a "sad version." Students should view both performances, noting the actor's tone and expressions. Which version seems more appropriate to the text, given the students' understanding of Capulet's character? Students might perform their own versions of the speech, making choices they think best serve the scene and character. Students should view the [character interview in 4.5](#) for inspiration.

##### ***From a Servant's Perspective***

At several points in Act 4, we get a glimpse of the action from Capulet servants' and musicians' perspectives. Have students review [4.2](#) and [4.5](#). How do the servants and musicians react to the goings-on in the Capulet household? In what ways does their presence provide comic relief for family tragedy? For a creative approach, imagine a few of the servants and musicians are on break from their frenzied work, and write a scene of conversation. As they gossip about the events of the past few scenes,

what do they say to each other? What do they think of the Capulets? Of Paris? Of Juliet's death? What rumors might be going around?

### ***Juliet's Soliloquy***

In [Act 4, Scene 3](#), Juliet delivers a famous soliloquy as she prepares to drink the potion that will make her appear dead. She goes through wide range of emotions in the span of just a few minutes. Have students watch myShakespeare's performance video and the character interview at the end of the scene. Then have them go over the text of Juliet's speech, writing emotion/feeling words in the margins for each feeling she seems to be experiencing. Students should circle words and images that connect to these emotions as they go.

## **Act V**

### **Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts**

#### **A Few Basic Questions...**

- What specific errors in judgment lead to Romeo's belief that Juliet has truly died? How might this have been prevented?
- Who is to blame for the young lovers' tragic end? To what extent do Romeo and Juliet bear responsibility for their own deaths, despite their young age?
- Do you believe Romeo and Juliet died for love, or something else entirely?
- Do you believe that the Montagues and Capulets will truly reconcile after this? Why or why not?

#### **Digging Deeper...**

##### ***Debate: Who's to Blame?***

In the final lines of the play, the Prince says, "Some shall be pardoned, and some punished." But *who* gets pardoned? And *who* gets punished? Students can debate these very questions in anything ranging from an informal discussion to an all-out trial—whatever works for your classroom. In whatever form this debate takes, students should make a "pardoned" list and a "punished" list, with evidence exonerating or indicting the accused, and—if guilty—what their punishment should be.

##### ***Acting the End***

[Act 5, Scene 3](#) has a lot of moving parts and a great many characters. That makes it a great opportunity for your students to test out their acting chops, because there's something for everyone, from bit players to major stars. If the class is small, everyone can be involved in some way, but larger classes may need to be split into groups. Encourage students to pick an unconventional style, setting, or time period in which to adapt the scene (Old West? Corporate America? Mars in the future?). Students might also adapt the language for their chosen setting, capturing the tone and meaning with words appropriate to their choice. More kinetic learners can be in charge of blocking and choreography, deciding where and how the actors physically interact on your stage.

### **Romeo and Juliet in a Hurry**

Trying to summarize a long and complex play is a difficult task. Summarizing is not only a good review exercise, but it also helps us to prioritize what is most important: how is plot related to the meaning of the play? In this case, we'll keep things simple: just try summarizing the [final scene of Act 5](#). What are the most essential plot points that occur in the scene? What details can you leave out? Help students strike a balance between key information and extraneous detail by emphasizing the minimum that readers need to know in order to understand the ending of the play.

### **Reflection**

Reflect on your experience reading *Romeo and Juliet* and watching myShakespeare's performances and interviews. Write a 1-2 page reaction paper. You may wish to respond to one or more questions from the following list:

- What moments in *Romeo and Juliet* resonated most strongly for you?
- How did watching myShakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* affect your experience of studying *Romeo and Juliet*?
- Did the interviews make clear anything that you had missed in reading the text, or provide you with additional insight into characters' thoughts and motivations?
- Were there moments when you wish Ralph had asked characters additional "tough questions"—and if so, what questions, to whom, and at what point? How did the actors' performances match or fail to match what you imagined of the roles when you read the text?
- If you were creating myShakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet 2.0*, what would you keep, and what would you change?

## Culminating Essays and Projects

### Thematic Essays

*Below are a few prompts for essays that grapple with some of Romeo and Juliet's overarching themes. These prompts are designed to be open-ended and invite student interpretation of the play as a whole.*

Much of *Romeo and Juliet* grapples with the old idea of courtly love, often mocking it outright. Research the concept of courtly love and pick three scenes from the play that mock its conventions to analyze. What is it about courtly love that Shakespeare seems to be critiquing? Are there other forms of love in the play that he seems to celebrate?

*Romeo and Juliet* makes use of several motifs that illuminate the play's themes: Juliet as the bride of death, darkness and light, dreams, etc. Choose one motif—or two, if you're feeling ambitious. To what effect does Shakespeare use these recurring ideas and imagery in the play? How does your chosen motif affect the viewer's understanding of the play and its themes?

Who is to blame for Romeo's and Juliet's deaths? The Friar and the Nurse? Mercutio and Tybalt? Montague and Capulet? Romeo and Juliet, themselves? Make your case with evidence from the text. Consider choosing multiple characters and comparing and contrasting the extent to which they bear responsibility for the play's tragic end.

### Performance Projects

By performing *Romeo and Juliet*, students can gain new insight into the play's themes and characters. Of course performance projects can go far beyond the standard group project, so we've listed a few different options you might consider as ways to cap off your class's *Romeo and Juliet* unit:

- Divide your class into groups and assign each group key scenes from the play to perform for the entire class. But here's the catch: each group must reinterpret the scene for a different setting: Ancient Greece, Victorian England, Communist Russia—whatever you can dream up.
- Have students script new combinations of characters and perform those scenes. What would Benvolio say to Juliet? What would happen if Montague and Capulet got stuck in an elevator together? What might the Prince and the Nurse have to say to each other about all the events in Verona?
- Have students stage key scenes and film them cinema-style. Students can even edit them all together into a movie trailer for *Romeo and Juliet*. You can shake things up by assigning them different genres: *Romeo and Juliet* as a romantic drama, for example. Or an action flick, perhaps?
- If your class isn't a good fit for group projects, you can assign individual students monologues or soliloquies to perform. If the class can handle it, encourage some friendly competition by

awarding a prize for the best performance at the end. Points can be awarded for accurate memorization, interesting interpretations, impressive costumes, etc.

- Get the entire school involved by having students perform live for everyone, or by screening filmed versions of their scenes. Faculty judges can review the scenes on the spot to add a live-show atmosphere.