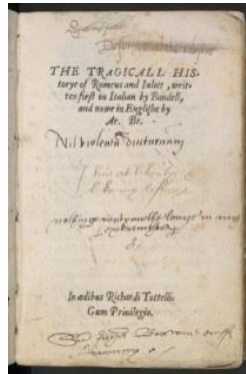


# Romeo and Juliet (c. 1595)

## Contextual information

## Quotes from *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare took his plot involving a tragic feud between two noble families from a popular folktale, which was first translated into English by Arthur Brooke in 1562. In [The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet](#), Brooke gives the story a cautionary message, warning that if we give in to lust and neglect the advice of our parents, we will face an 'unhappye deathe'. When writing his own version, Shakespeare squeezed Brooke's nine-month story into five days, and reduced Juliet's age from scarcely 16 to 'not yet 14'. Shakespeare also inserted a sword fight between Tybalt and Benvolio in the first scene, and expanded the roles of Paris, Mercutio and the Nurse, using comedy to offset tragic tension.



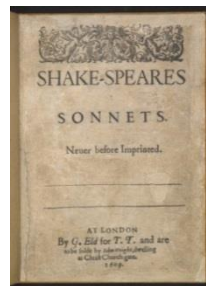
Explore [Brooke's Romeus and Juliet](#)

[Masks](#) were a common feature of popular entertainment and everyday life in early modern Italy. Travelling troupes of [masked commedia dell' arte players](#) performed stylised bawdy scenes at carnival time in Venice. These are perhaps a little like the masquers and torchbearers in Act 1, Scene 4 of *Romeo and Juliet*.



View [masked players in the friendship album of Alexander Faber](#)

The 14-line sonnet form was most commonly used for love poems. It originated in 13th-century Italy and was imported to England in the 16th century. In his lifetime, Shakespeare was well-known as a poet as well as a playwright, and he published a collection of sonnets in 1609. He also incorporated sonnets into some of his plays, most famously when the lovers first kiss in *Romeo and Juliet*.



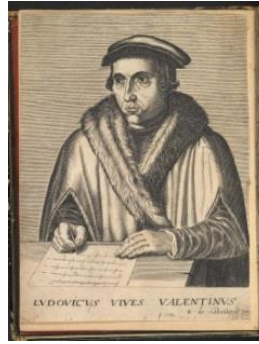
Explore the [first edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets, 1609](#)

In the early modern period, same-sex friendship (particularly male friendship) was held in high esteem and could be described with a vocabulary that we would now associate with romantic love. Sometimes same-sex friendships were intense but platonic (i.e. non-sexual); on other occasions the intimacy of friendship provided a framework in which same-sex desire could be explored. Mercutio's banter with Romeo has strongly sexual elements and critics debate whether this suggests platonic friendship or desire.



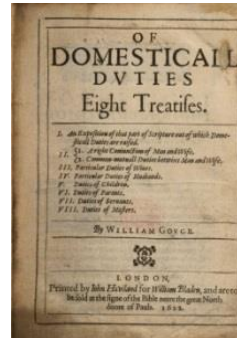
Explore [friendship in George Withers' emblem book](#)

Conduct books for women gave moral and practical guidance on all aspects of life from infancy to widowhood. Juan Luis Vives' conduct book (1523) is in some ways progressive, recommending education for women, but it still foregrounds the virtues of chastity and obedience and it takes a bleak view of love. When it comes to choosing a husband, Vives says maidens should keep quiet, and leave these decisions to their parents: 'it becometh not a maide to talke, where hir father and mother be in comunicacion about hir mariage'.



Explore [Vives' conduct book for Christian women](#)

Modern audiences are often shocked by the age of the young protagonists, particularly Juliet who is 13. But audiences in Shakespeare's day might also have been shocked since the average age for English women to get married was in their mid-twenties, and men in their mid to late-twenties. In his conduct book (1622), William Gouge establishes the legal minimum age as 12 for girls and 14 for boys, but suggests that it is better to wait 'some yeares longer'.



Discover [Of Domesticall Duties by William Gouge, 1622](#)

In early modern England, people were keenly aware of the dangers and benefits of plants as remedies and poisons. John Gerard's *Herball* (1597) includes a section on 'sleeping nightshade' which has sleep-inducing properties. When consumed it makes people waver between sleep and death. Gerard warns that it is so 'furious and deadly' that it provokes 'a dead sleepe wherein many have died'.



Discover [poisons, sleep-inducing plants and love potions in Gerard's Herball](#)

Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* at a time of public rioting, outbreaks of violence and civil unrest in London. In June 1595, around 1,000 apprentices took part in a riot on Tower Hill to protest about the appalling social conditions in the city.



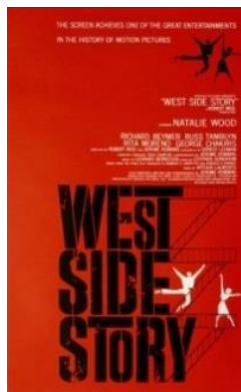
Find out more about the [rebellion by London apprentices in 1595](#)

In his fight scenes, Shakespeare incorporates Italian terms for tricky fencing manoeuvres like the 'passado' and the 'punto reverso' (2.4.26–33). At this time, the Italian fashion for fencing with rapiers – narrow, double-edged swords – was a novelty in England and it prompted mixed reactions. The fencing master, Vincentio Saviolo promotes fencing as a means to resolve disputes, but he is keenly aware of how easily 'frivolous quarrell[s]' can descend into 'deadly hatreds'.



Explore an [Elizabethan fencing manual](#)

*Romeo and Juliet* is the most filmed of Shakespeare's plays and has often been relocated to different settings around the world. One of the most famous film adaptations is *West Side Story*. The musical about rival New York gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, added an injection of teenage cool to the tragedy, dispensing with Shakespeare's words while emphasising the story's emotion.



View a [West Side Story film poster](#)

A number of modern productions of *Romeo and Juliet* have emphasised the poignant theme of love across the boundaries.

In 1994, a production of the play was jointly produced by the Al-Kasaba Theatre in Ramallah and the Khan Theatre in Jerusalem, starring a Palestinian Romeo and an Israeli Juliet. The dialogue was translated into a mixture of Hebrew and Arabic, and subtitles in both languages were shown during the performance. The directors, Fouad Awad and Eran Baniel, intended 'to remind all that the cost of hatred between fathers is the death of their children'.



View a [photograph of a Palestinian-Israeli Romeo and Juliet, 1994](#)

In 2015 a Syrian production of *Romeo and Juliet* *Separated by War* used an all-teenage cast made up of two groups located in neighbouring countries – Jordan and Syria – who never met except for their performance via Skype.



View [photographs of a Syrian Romeo and Juliet, 2015](#)