

Romeo and Juliet: Star-crossed Lovers
By Elissa Wolf

Romeo and Juliet is certainly considered one of Shakespeare's most well-known plays, and is often a highschooler's first introduction to Shakespeare. Though the story is sometimes first encountered through its many pop culture reincarnations such as, *Gnomeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story*, *Warm Bodies*, and of course Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film starring 90's heartthrob Leonardo DiCaprio.

Of all Shakespeare's works, *Romeo and Juliet* is one that seemingly focuses on love, but it is more than just a love story. It is important to remember its tragic ending. The full title of the play, *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, tells us what to expect. It can be easy to assume that this tragic ending is the result of impulsive teenage lust, triggered by love at first sight, and certainly in Shakespeare's story their romance progresses rapidly.

However, if we look at the source material for the play this was not always the case. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* took inspiration from a well-known story from French and Italian literature. Arthur Brooke published the first English translation of the story in 1562. In this English translation the couple's love builds over the course of months, instead of just a few days. Shakespeare's pace certainly adds an urgency to the story, but I don't believe it negates the certainty of their love.

The language used in the play stresses the love Romeo and Juliet have for each other. During Shakespeare's time the pronouns 'You' and 'Thou' helped to highlight the relationships between characters. They emphasized status, familiarity, emotion, etc. Throughout the play the 'You' and 'Thou' use between the couple follows the literary convention of mutual lovers with the shared usage of 'Thou' forms. The pronouns show their love to be consistent, shared, and true. Romeo and Juliet are unwavering in their love for each other, and it is this steadfast love that makes their fate so tragic. More than a love story, the love in *Romeo and Juliet* is surrounded by violence and societal expectation.

Violence opens the play with a brawl between the Montagues and Capulets. Both Romeo and Juliet are expected to listen and obey their families. Romeo and Juliet's desires are ignored. They are constantly pulled between following their individual desires and conforming to the beliefs held by the society they are a part of. The desire they have for each other challenges the 'ancient grudge' between the two families and the status quo of their community. Their opposition puts them in harms way. Love and pain are continually connected throughout the play, underscored by the couple's eventual suicides. In this story love is not simply sweet, it is complex and dangerous.

"From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life;
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife."
(1.1.5-8)

Themes, language, and source material are just a few of the topics analyzed during Chesapeake Shakespeare's Critical Analysis class. By delving into topics such as these we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the story as a whole. With that in mind please enjoy Chesapeake Shakespeare Company's Student Matinee production of *Romeo and Juliet*.