

the seventeenth century as *The History and Fall of Caius Marius*, the violent setting became that of a particularly discordant period in classical Rome; when Leonard Bernstein and his collaborators [Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim] rewrote the play as *West Side Story*, they chose the violent world of New York street gangs.)

After you have read the play, we invite you to read "A Modern Perspective" on *Romeo and Juliet*, written by Gail Kern Paster, Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

## Reading Shakespeare's Language

For many people today, reading Shakespeare's language can be a problem—but it is a problem that can be solved. Those who have studied Latin (or even French or German or Spanish) and those who are used to reading poetry will have little difficulty understanding the language of Shakespeare's poetic drama. Others, however, need to develop the skills of untangling unusual sentence structures and of recognizing and understanding poetic compressions, omissions, and wordplay. And even those skilled in reading unusual sentence structures may have occasional trouble with Shakespeare's words. Four hundred years of "static"—caused by changes in language and in life—intervene between his speaking and our hearing. Most of his immense vocabulary is still in use, but a few of his words are no longer used, and many of his words now have meanings quite different from those they had in the sixteenth century. In the theater, most of these difficulties are solved for us by actors who study the language and articulate it for us so that the essential meaning is heard—or, when combined with stage action, is at least *felt*. When reading on one's own, one must do what each actor does: go over the lines (often with a dictionary close at hand) until the puzzles are solved and the lines yield up their poetry and the characters speak in words and phrases that are, suddenly, rewarding and wonderfully memorable.

### Shakespeare's Words

As you begin to read the opening scenes of a play by Shakespeare, you may notice occasional unfamiliar

words. Some are unfamiliar simply because we no longer use them. In the opening scenes of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, you will find the words *misadventured* (i.e., unlucky), *an* (i.e., if), *marry* (an old oath "by the Virgin Mary," which had by Shakespeare's time become a mere interjection, like "indeed"), and *soft* (an interjection that means "hold," "enough," or "wait a minute"). Words of this kind are explained in notes to the text and will become familiar the more of Shakespeare's plays you read.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, as in all of Shakespeare's writing, more problematic are the words that we still use but that now have different meanings. In the opening scenes of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, the word *heavy* has the meaning of "sorrowful," the word *envious* is used where we would say "malicious," *sadly* where we would use "gravely" or "seriously," *his* where we would use "its," *happy* where we would say "fortunate," *cousin* where we would say "kinsman," and *still* where we would say "always." Such words will be explained in the notes to the text, but they, too, will become familiar as you continue to read Shakespeare's language.

Some words are strange not because of the "static" introduced by changes in language over the past centuries but because these are words that Shakespeare uses to build a dramatic world that has its own space and time. *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, builds, in its opening scenes, a location that is characterized by specific customs and conflicts. The play creates this sense of place through references to "civil blood," to maskers, to Lammastide, to bucklers, clubs, bills, and partisans. Furthermore, *Romeo and Juliet* introduces us to a poetic language by means of which its characters shape their world. This is the language of love poetry (spread throughout Europe in the sonnets of the

fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch), which we hear in references to "Dian's wit," to Aurora, to Petrarch himself, to "Cupid's arrow," and "love's weak childish bow." (Gail Kern Paster's essay, "A Modern Perspective," at the back of this edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, discusses the impact that the world of Petrarchan love poetry has on the life and death of the young lovers.) These "local" references create the Verona that Juliet, Romeo, Mercutio, and their fellows and guardians inhabit; it will become increasingly familiar to you as you get further into the play.

### Shakespeare's Sentences

In an English sentence, meaning is dependent on the place given each word. "The dog bit the boy" and "The boy bit the dog" mean very different things, even though the individual words are the same. Because English places such importance on the positions of words in sentences, on the way words are arranged, unusual arrangements can puzzle a reader. Shakespeare frequently shifts his sentences away from "normal" English arrangements—often in order to create the rhythm he seeks, sometimes in order to use a line's poetic rhythm to emphasize a particular word, sometimes to give a character his or her own speech patterns or to allow the character to speak in a special way. When we attend a good performance of the play, the actors will have worked out the sentence structures and will articulate the sentences so that the meaning is clear. When reading the play, we need to do as the actor does: that is, when puzzled by a character's speech, we check to see if words are being presented in an unusual sequence.

Shakespeare often places the verb before the subject

(e.g., instead of "He goes" we find "Goes he"). In the opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, when Montague says (1.1.140) "Away from light steals home my heavy son" (instead of "my son steals home"), he is using such a construction; Benvolio does so as well when, at 1.1.110–11, he says, "In the instant *came* / The fiery *Tybalt*," and at 1.2.89–90, when he says, "At this same ancient feast of Capulet's / *Supps* the fair *Rosaline*." Such inversions rarely cause much confusion. More problematic is Shakespeare's frequent placing of the object before the subject and verb (e.g., instead of "I hit him," we might find "Him I hit"). Sampson's line to Gregory (1.1.29), "Me they shall feel," is an example of such an inversion. Montague's "Black and portentous must this humor prove" (1.1.144) is a variant of such a construction, this time with the predicate adjectives "black and portentous" preceding the subject and verb. Paris uses a similar inversion when he says, at 1.2.4, "Of honorable reckoning are you both" (where the "normal" order would be "You are both of honorable reckoning"), as does Capulet at 1.2.26–30, when he says, "Such comfort as do lusty young men feel . . . shall you this night / Inherit at my house" (where the normal order would be "You shall inherit [i.e., receive] such comfort at my house as lusty young men do feel").

Inversions are not the only unusual sentence structures in Shakespeare's language. Often in his sentences words that would normally appear together are separated from each other. (Again, this is often done to create a particular rhythm or to stress a particular word.) Capulet's instruction to Paris to "like her most whose merit most shall be" (1.2.31) separates the subject ("merit") from its verb ("shall be"). Benvolio's lines that begin at 1.1.122—"A troubled mind drove me to walk abroad, / *Where* underneath the grove of sycamore / That westward rooteth from this city side, / So

early walking *did I see your son*"—interrupt the normal construction "where I did see your son" by inserting a series of phrases and inverting the subject and part of the verb. The Nurse, in 1.3, interrupts the sequence "weaned upon that day" when she says, "And *she was weaned* (I never shall forget it) / Of all the days of the year, *upon that day*" (26–27). In order to create sentences that seem more like the English of everyday speech, one can rearrange the words, putting together the word clusters ("merit shall be," "where I did see," "she was weaned upon that day"), placing the remaining words in their more familiar order. The result will usually be an increase in clarity but a loss of rhythm or a shift in emphasis.

Locating and rearranging words that "belong together" is especially necessary in passages that separate subjects from verbs and verbs from objects by long delaying or expanding interruptions. When the Prince, at 1.1.91–93, says to the citizens of Verona,

*Three civil brawls* bred of an airy word  
By thee, old Capulet, and Montague,  
*Have thrice disturbed* the quiet of *our streets*,

he uses such an interrupted construction. Romeo uses a similar construction when he says, at 1.4.113–16, "*my mind misgives* [i.e., fears that] / *Some consequence* yet hanging in the stars / *Shall bitterly begin* his fearful date [i.e., its dreadful term] / With this night's revels." In some plays (*Hamlet*, for instance), long interrupted sentences play an important part in the play's language. In *Romeo and Juliet*, such constructions are rare, since the sentences in this play tend to be shorter than in most of Shakespeare's plays.

Finally, in *Romeo and Juliet*, as in other of Shakespeare's plays, sentences are sometimes complicated

not because of unusual structures or interruptions but because Shakespeare omits words and parts of words that English sentences normally require. (In conversation, we, too, often omit words. We say, "Heard from him yet?" and our hearer supplies the missing "Have you.") Frequent reading of Shakespeare—and of other poets—trains us to supply such missing words. In plays written ten years or so after *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare uses omissions both of verbs and of nouns to great dramatic effect. In *Romeo and Juliet* omissions are few and seem to result from the poet's wish to create regular iambic pentameter lines. At 1.1.107, for instance, Montague asks "were you by?" instead of "were you nearby?" creating a rhythmically regular line. At 1.1.121 ("Peered forth the golden window of the east"), Benvolio, by omitting the word "from" in the phrase "forth from," again creates a regular rhythm. At 1.1.133 he omits the word "one" in the line "And gladly shunned [one] who gladly fled from me," and at 1.2.104 he omits the phrase "that of" from the lines "let there be weighed / Your lady's love against [that of] some other maid."

### Shakespearean Wordplay

Shakespeare plays with language so often and so variously that entire books are written on the topic. Here we will mention only two kinds of wordplay, puns and metaphors. A pun is a play on words that have more than one meaning. The opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet* begins with a whole series of puns: *move* is used to mean "provoke" and then in its more usual sense, and *stand* is used to mean "take a stand" and "stand still," building to Gregory's conclusion that "if thou art moved thou runnest away." In these examples, the

dialogue openly reminds us that the words *move* and *stand* have more than one meaning. In other places in this scene, as throughout the play, words are used so that the second meaning is implied but not spelled out. When, to take one of hundreds of examples, at 1.4.17–18 Mercutio says to Romeo, "Borrow Cupid's wings / And soar with them above a common bound," the word *bound* has the primary meaning of "a leap," but the meaning of "a limit" is also suggested. (In the glosses to the text, puns of this sort are often indicated by numbered meanings—e.g., *bound* is glossed as "(1) leap; (2) limit.") Puns are so important in this play that a section of one very crucial scene (3.5) is built around very serious punning as Juliet, on the surface, expresses anger that Romeo has killed her cousin, while, with the same words, she expresses her grief at being separated from Romeo:

JULIET

God pardon him. I do with all my heart,  
And yet no man like he doth grieve my heart.

LADY CAPULET

That is because the traitor murderer lives.

JULIET

Ay, madam, from the reach of these my hands.  
Would none but I might venge my cousin's death!  
(3.5.87–91)

In these lines, the word *grieve*, for example, is heard by her mother as meaning "incense with anger," but it also means "afflict with longing"; the word *reach* is heard by her mother as meaning "grasp," but it also means "touch." In all of Shakespeare's plays, but especially in *Romeo and Juliet*, one must stay alert to the sounds of words and to the possibility of double meanings.

A metaphor is a play on words in which one object

or idea is expressed as if it were something else, something with which it is said to share common features. For instance, when Romeo meets Juliet at the dance, and says, as he touches her hand (1.5.104–05), “If I profane with my unworthing hand / This holy shrine,” and goes on to talk about their meeting as if he were a pilgrim at the shrine of a saint, he is using metaphoric language. When he sees Juliet through her window and asks, “what light through yonder window breaks?” (2.2.2), he begins a series of metaphors in which he tries to put into words how Juliet looks to him—like the sun, like stars, like a winged messenger of heaven. Metaphors are often used when the idea being conveyed is hard to express, and the speaker is thus given language that helps to carry the idea or the feeling to his or her listener—and to the audience. In Romeo’s metaphors of Juliet-as-saint and Juliet-as-light, he uses metaphors from the poetic tradition that attempt to express the overpowering feelings that come with being in love.

### Implied Stage Action

Finally, in reading Shakespeare’s plays we should always remember that what we are reading is a performance script. The dialogue is written to be spoken by actors who, at the same time, are moving, gesturing, picking up objects, weeping, shaking their fists. Some stage action is described in what are called “stage directions”; some is suggested within the dialogue itself. We must learn to be alert to such signals as we stage the play in our imaginations. When, in the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, Tybalt says, “What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds? / Turn thee, Benvolio; look upon thy death,” it is clear that Benvolio must earlier have drawn his sword, and Benvolio’s

lio’s response to Tybalt, “Put up thy sword,” makes it just as clear that Tybalt has drawn his—probably just when he says “Turn thee, Benvolio.” When Lady Capulet says, in 1.3, “Nurse, give leave awhile. / We must talk in secret.—Nurse, come back again” (8–9), we can be sure that the Nurse begins to leave; since she soon enters into the conversation, we can be equally sure that she returns as ordered. At several places in *Romeo and Juliet*, signals to the reader are not quite so clear. When Sampson says, at 1.1.34, “My naked weapon is out,” one would assume that he has drawn his sword. The dialogue that follows, though, makes it improbable that he is standing there with his sword drawn. Here a director—and you as reader—must decide just what Sampson would do as he says these lines. Equally interesting challenges are offered by the fight scene in which Mercutio is killed, reportedly “under [Romeo’s] arm.” The text leaves open several possibilities for staging that killing.

It is immensely rewarding to work carefully with Shakespeare’s language—with the words, the sentences, the wordplay, and the implied stage action—as readers for the past four centuries have discovered. It may be more pleasurable to attend a good performance of a play—though not everyone has thought so. But the joy of being able to stage a Shakespeare play in one’s imagination, to return to passages that continue to yield further meanings (or further questions) the more one reads them—these are pleasures that, for many, rival (or at least augment) those of the performed text, and certainly make it worth considerable effort to “break the code” of Elizabethan poetic drama and let free the remarkable language that makes up a Shakespeare text.