

On the Source and Five Characters of

Romeo and Juliet

Kwang-Ho Kim

I. Shakespeare's adaptation of the source

In composing *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare did not have to invent its basic story, because it was common dramatic practice that the Elizabethan dramatists drew upon known histories, legends and stories for the plot material of their plays. The story on which *Romeo and Juliet* is formed was originally written by Luigi da Porto of Italy. His tale of the noble lovers of Verona, Giulietta and Romeo, published in 1530, mainly agrees with Shakespeare's play in its plot, except a notable variant that Giulietta awakes and exchanges words with Romeo before his death of the poison, and then she dies by drawing her breath and holding it long.¹⁾ This tale was so popular in Italy that it was soon retold both in prose and verse by many writers, and later dramatized in Italy, Spain and France. In 1554 Matteo Bandello of Italy published his novella, *Romeo e Giulietta*, based on da Porto.

In 1559 a French writer by the name of Pierre Boaistuau translated Bandello's version into French. He added a number of fatalistic and ominous touches to the straightforward tale of the original, and it was he that postponed Juliet's awakening till after Romeo's death, letting her die with his dagger.²⁾ In this form the tale came to England, where appeared two adaptations based on Boaistuau's story, Arthur Brooke's long narrative poem, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), and William Painter's prose tale in his *Palace of Pleasure* (1567). Most critics agree that Shakespeare composed his play directly and perhaps solely from Brooke's poem, though he surely knew Painter.³⁾ In fact, we see that Shakespeare has not only followed the poem in the plot, but also often borrowed the very words and phrases of dialogue. But he has brought many noteworthy alterations in disposing his source-material, according as the dramatic requirements.

In the first place, Shakespeare has completely transformed the general tone of the story. Brooke said in the address "To the Reader" before his poem:

1) Cf. Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, Vol. I* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 271.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 274.

3) Cf. Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 39.

To this good ende, serve all ill endes, of yll begynnynge. And to this ende (good Reader) is this tragicall matter written, to describe unto thee a coople of unfortunate lovers, thralling themselves to unhonest desire, neglecting the authoritie and advise of parents and frendes, conferring their principall counsels with dronken gossypes, and superstitious friers...abusyng the honourable name of lawfull marriage, the cloke the shame of stolne contractes, finallye, by all meanes of unhonest lyfe, hastyng to most unhappye deathe.⁴⁾

Luckily in the poem itself, however, Brooke did not fully practise his programme, and often showed his sympathy with the lovers, now and then stressing Romeus's integrity and Juliet's modesty. But he was a puritan, too serious-minded to understand the fiery passion of the original story, and the tone of his poem was condemnatory on the whole. He represented Juliet as a cunning wench who was married secretly to Romeus and yet going to accept Paris's love to pacify her parents' anger. To him Romeus was nothing but a conventional example of love-sick youths that possessed nothing of the sentiment and grace of Shakespeare's protagonist. In the play, the love of Romeo and Juliet is passionate, but it is, at the same time, pure. We do not find any trace of unhonest desire or a lust of blood, for "the beauty and ardour of young love are seen by Shakespeare as the irradiating glory of sunlight and starlight in a dark world."⁵⁾

Shakespeare has also compressed the time of action greatly: in Brooke it extends over nine months, while in the play it is compressed into merely five or six days. This rapidity of action not only heightens the intensity and dramatic passion, but also induces a feeling of tragic inevitability. "The world", as Charlton puts it, "seems for a moment to be caught up in the fierce play of furies revelling in some mad supernatural game".⁶⁾ Brooke set Capulet's feast in a dreary winter night and the balcony scene a few weeks later. Shakespeare lets the lovers meet in the same night, and moreover he changes the time of action into midsummer. Hazlitt argues that the play has "the softness of a southern spring,"⁷⁾ and Coleridge sees that in the play "all is youth and spring—it is youth with its follies, its virtues, its precipitancies; it is spring with its odours, flowers, and transiency,"⁸⁾ but the atmosphere of the play is certainly that of midsummer, as Dowden rightly insists:

The season is midsummer. It wants a fortnight and odd days of Lammastide (August 1st)...The mid-July heat broods over the five tragic days of the story. The mad blood is stirring in men's veins during these hot summer days. The summer was needed also that

4) Bullough, pp. 284-285.

5) Caroline F.E. Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 310.

6) H.B. Charlton, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge. U.P., 1948), p. 56.

7) William Hazlitt *Characters of Shakespeare's plays* (London: Oxford. U.P., 1916), p. 110.

8) Terence Hawkes, ed., *Coleridge on Shakespeare* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 112.

the nights and mornings might quickly meet. The nights are those luminous nights from which the daylight seems never wholly to depart, nights through which the warmth of day still hangs over the trees and flowers.⁹⁾

Surely the hot days of Italian summer are most suited to inciting the impetuous youths to fight on the streets, as Benvolio thinks the hot weather is to arouse hot blood:

The day is hot, the Capels are abroad,
And if we meet we shall not 'scape a brawl,
For now these hot days is the mad blood stirring. (III. i. 2-4)¹⁰⁾

And the soft warm nights of Italian summer are also well suited to the lovers whispering their passionate love to each other.

After reading the play we are impressed rather by the passion of youth than by the gloom of the tragedy, and this effect is mainly brought by the life of youth with which the play is filled. The old are no less fierce than the young in their passion. Old Capulet and Montague are as full of the ardour of youth as fiery Tybalt:

Cap. My sword I say! Old Montague is come,
And flourishes his blade in spite of me.
Mont. Thou villain Capulet! Hold me not! Let me go! (I. i. 75-77)

The Nurse finds her pleasure in the reminiscences of her youth, and Friar Lawrence extends his ardent sympathy to the lovers, tasting his own youth in their love. Benvolio is of a quiet character, but even he, at a touch, kindles into flame. Mercutio and Tybalt are easily driven by youthful ardour. Romeo, melancholy and fanciful with his love for Rosaline at the outset, leaps at a bound into a passionate youth. Among these ardent youths, it is sweet to see a childish innocence in Juliet who is a specimen of the first love.¹¹⁾ As soon as the time comes, however, she, too, is captivated by young passion. Between the lovers one sight is enough; the same night that Romeo meets Juliet at the masked ball, he climbs over the orchard wall, plans the marriage with Juliet, and the next day their secret marriage is performed. The sense of swiftness is completely in accordance with their impetuous and passionate love and its tragedy.

With the rapidity of action Shakespeare has also brought stronger motivation and a far greater power of characterization. In Painter's poem the characters were no more than

9) Edward Dowden, *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1875), pp. 102-103.

10) The text used in this essay is that of *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Arden Shakespeare Edition*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: Methuen, 1980). Line references are also to the same edition.

11) Shakespeare's Juliet is not yet fourteen, while she is sixteen in Brooke and eighteen in Bandello and Painter.

lifeless dolls, while Shakespeare's genius has changed them into living creatures, distinct, loving, fighting and talking, in joy and sorrow. Each of them is brimming over with thought, passion and action, none resembling the others. In Brooke Tybalt was killed in an ordinary street fight between the Capulets and the Montagues, but in the play he finds Romeo at the ball, and his anger, strengthened by the rebuke Capulet gives him, brings about Mercutio's and his own deaths, leading to Romeo's banishment and the subsequent series of the tragic events. Mercutio's merry and witty character, which contrasts sharply with Romeo's dreaming and fanciful character in the former part of the play, is Shakespeare's invention out of mere hint in Brooke's poem. The Nurse's character is also richly expanded, and the excellent comic portraiture in her is almost wholly Shakespeare's creation out of rough sketch that Brooke gave.

In the play they "not only become vital and amusing in themselves but also help to link the romance of Romeo and Juliet with an earthy sense of reality"¹²⁾. The rest of the characters, down to the servants, are also drawn life-like with distinctive and vivid peculiarity. They are much more than mere background, and mingled together to weave the tragic story. The play shows that already the dramatist is handling his source-material with a masterly sense of dramatic possibilities. Brooke's poem is no more than "a leaden work which Shakespeare transmuted to gold".¹³⁾

II. Benvolio and Tybalt

Benvolio, Romeo's cousin and close friend, with deep sympathy for the love-sick friend, tries sincerely to lead him out of his useless, melancholic life. Hoping that Romeo's unrequited love for Rosaline will be cured by a new one, he persuades him to go to Capulet's masked ball, so that he may have a chance to compare her with other beautiful ladies. Quite contrary to Tybalt, Benvolio is a consistent peace-maker, and with good will wants to keep the peace between the two feuding families. At the outset of the play, he tries to halt the brawl among the rival servants, asking Tybalt in vain to join his efforts. Later he begs Mercutio to avoid trouble by keeping out of the way of the Capulets. And it is again he that tries to preserve the peace when the hot-blooded Mercutio incites Tybalt to fight him.

In this patiently peace-loving youth, however, we find no genius and little imagination, though his wit is displayed now and then in a mild irony. When Romeo and Mercutio exchange witty conversation, this level-headed youth can not possibly compete with his friends in sophisticated witticisms. He is not an Italian youth, but one of those English youths that Shakespeare perhaps met often at the Elizabethan court.¹⁴⁾

12) Douglas Cole, ed., "Introduction," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Romeo and Juliet* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-hall, 1970), p. 5.

13) Bullough, pp. 277-278.

14) Cf. Stopford A. Brooke, *On Ten Plays of Shakespeare* (London: Constable, 1925), p. 42.

Tybalt's character is well summarized twice by Mercutio:

O, he's the courageous captain of compliments:—the very butcher of a silk button—a duellist, a duellist, a gentleman of the very first house, of the first and second cause. (II. iv. 19-25)

A braggart, a rogue, a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic—(III. i. 102-103)

He is an expert swordsman, but his ill-temper makes him look like a swashbuckler or bully. By nature he is high-spirited and keenly sensitive on the point of honour, but he is hot-blooded to quarrel over trifles and to challenge a smile or a motion of the hand. His character is quite in contrast with that of Benvolio who always bears himself with cool patience. Benvolio wants only to keep the peace between the families, while Tybalt wants only to make trouble, for he believes that the feud can come to an end solely by killing the antagonists. When Benvolio, trying to stop the fray among the rival servants, asks Tybalt to help him, the latter sets the fight resuming by attacking the former. At over-hearing Romeo's voice at the feast, he instantly sends for his rapier to attack him, and his rage can be curbed only by the angered Capulet's threatening restraint. He seeks out Romeo next day to challenge him, and his quick temper, not responding to Romeo's plea for reasonableness, brings Mercutio's and his own deaths, so providing the ultimate cause of the disastrous events that follow one another with fateful speed.

Mercutio calls him "Good King of Cats" (III. i. 76), playing on his name, which corresponds with that of a cat, Tybert, in the beast epic of *Raynard the Fox*. Surely, like a cat, he is treacherous and cunning and devoid of true manliness. He strikes Mercutio down with a cowardly thrust of his sword, delivered under the arm of the intervening Romeo, and flees with his followers.

III. Mercutio

Mercutio is sharply in contrast with Romeo and Benvolio in his character, though they are close friends. He is worldly and sensual unlike the idealistic Romeo, and the quarrelsome unlike peace-loving Benvolio. He is passionate, impetuous, and always overbrimming with wild vigour of youth. He does not take love seriously, and his frequent cracking of bawdy jokes is indicative of his sole belief in sex. His description of the mild Benvolio as a man who is ready to quarrel over trifles is plainly a humorous mocking of his conciliatory attitude, and it applies to Mercutio himself rather than to his friend:

Why, thou wilt quarrel with a man that hath a hair more or a hair less in his beard than thou hast. Thou wilt quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes. Thy head is as full of quarrels as an egg is full of meat, (III. i. 16-23)

When Romeo professes good will to Tybalt who insults him, Mercutio, infuriated at his

friend's attitude, forces Tybalt into a duel, which brings about his own death.

Mercutio's light-heartedness makes him speak before he thinks, but his wayward speech is always full of imagination, as his fanciful Queen Mab speech (I. iv. 53-94) demonstrates. He is vituperative, making everything into a joke, and mocking at whomever he comes across, young and old, at his pleasure. His speech is, however, always accompanied with animated wit, which changes trivial things at a touch into serious ones. His wit is manly and vivid, for he does not learn it from books but thinks out of his brain. Moreover, his wit is kindly; though he unmercifully makes fun of Romeo for his useless love, he does it with warm compassion, not with a shadow of contempt. He loves Romeo dearly, and is overjoyed when Romeo returns to his full self and answers back with clever words to his witticisms:

Now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo; now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature. (II. iv. 89-91)

For this tender considerateness he is loved by friends so dearly that at his death Romeo loses his senses even to the extent to forget his love for Juliet, and the quiet Benvolio weeps for him, sadly crying:

O Romeo, Romeo, brave Mercutio is dead,
That gallant spirit hath aspir'd the clouds
Which too untimely here did scorn the earth. (III. i. 118-120)

His imagination and fancy have wonderful grace and lightness, sweeping over the surface of the things, not penetrating it. His thought and passion have not depth, but they go just to the proper degree. "His speech runs freely between fancies of exquisite delicacy and the coarser fringe of worldly humour."¹⁵⁾ Even when he is badly wounded and in great agonies of pain, his humour does not fail to work:

No, 'tis not so deep as a wall, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve.
Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man. (III. i. 97-99)

And even confronted by death, his unique humour continues bravely to the last:

Help me into some house, Benvolio,
Or I shall faint. A plague o' both your houses,
They have made worm's meat of me.
I have it, and soundly too. (III. i. 107-110)

So he dies, condemning the foolishness of the feud between the two families. It is a

¹⁵⁾ Charlton, p. 62.

pity that about Romeo there will be no one after his death who can "crack sentences like whips or set the hound of his fancy on the magic scent of Queen Mab."¹⁶ He is certainly the sole person who could understand Romeo's love, if he lived longer.

In Mercutio we find the sense of the Englishman and the dripping gaiety of the Italian, finely mixed together. It is often said that Mercutio is too brilliant a character to survive long in the play, and the dramatist put him to early death to make a better play. Dryden insists that Shakespeare "was obliged to kill Mercutio in the third act, lest he should have been killed by him."¹⁷ But his view is refuted by Dr. Johnson:

Mercutio's wit, gaiety and courage, will always procure him friends that wish him a longer life; but his death is not precipitated, he has lived out the time allotted him in the construction of the play; nor do I doubt the ability of *Shakespeare* to have continued his existence, though some of his sallies are perhaps out of the reach of Dryden...¹⁸

Nor can we agree with Dryden's view. Shakespeare carries even Falstaff, who is wittier than Mercutio, through three long plays. His genius never fails to meet his requirement through all of his plays. "It ebbs and flows, but when it ebbs it is because he has felt that it should not be too brilliant, not because he was not able to make it brilliant."¹⁹

IV. The Nurse

The Nurse of Juliet is one of Shakespeare's great comic creations, and she provides much of the humour in the play. She is a wonderfully talkative woman, and uses richly colourful language. Her speech is so peculiarly her own that we become concretely aware of her character as much from her manner of speaking as from what she says.

Shakespeare has had her pent up in his imagination; and out she gushes. He will give us nothing completer till he gives us Falstaff. We mark his confident, delighted knowledge of her by the prompt digression into which he lets her launch; the story may wait. It is not a set piece of fireworks such as Mercutio will touch off in honor of Queen Mab. The matter of it flows spontaneously into verse, the phrases are hers and hers alone, character unfolds with each phrase. You may, indeed, take any sentence the Nurse speaks throughout the play, and only she could speak it."²⁰

She has the impertinence and garrulity of an old servant, and, having cared for Juliet

16) Mark Van Doren, *Shakespeare* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1953), p.57.

17) Walter Raleigh, *Johnson on Shakespeare* (London: Oxford. U.P., 1908), p.188.

18) *Loc. cit.*

19) Brooke, p.44.

20) Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare, Vol. II* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1958), p.331.

since birth, she is now granted a privilege of a nurse who has long been trusted and well acquainted with the way of living of the Capulet household. She even advises and reproves her master and mistress. At the moment her mind is running on the question of Juliet's exact age, she enjoys in rambling through her memories of Juliet's infancy, and she is so garrulous and repetitive that Lady Capulet and Juliet are hard to restrain her. Her lack of education adds humour unconsciously to her speech, and her limited vocabulary makes her repeat the same words again and again. She is coarse and vulgar, having no refinements nor taste. Too old for marrying herself, she lives now in garrulous recollections, looking back to the pleasures of her youth, and sighing for her dead daughter and husband. She has neither conscience nor morality, and her life is unrestrained. Her only morality, if it can be called morality, is her concern with Juliet's marriage, but it scarcely matters who will be her husband. She even advises Juliet to commit bigamy, but doing such a thing seems to be quite natural to this immoral woman, who equates love with lust, marriage with sex, and sex with pregnancy. It is no wonder that the kind of love Juliet feels should be far beyond her comprehension.

She delights in her role of Juliet's messenger because she wants to win her attention and thanks, but this naughty woman, too eager to make herself of importance, teases her heartlessly, playing with her anxiety. When Juliet sends her out to meet Romeo she takes too long a time about her errand, and when she comes back and Juliet anxiously asks her about the wedding plan, she does not give her the message offhand, endlessly prattling on until Juliet is frantic:

Juliet. Now good sweet Nurse—O Lord, why look'st thou sad?

Though news be sad, yet tell them merrily,

If good, thou sham'st the music of sweet news

By playing it to me with so sour a face.

Nurse. I am aweary, give me leave awhile.

Fie, how my bones ache. What a jaunce have I!

Juliet. I would thou hadst my bones and I thy news.

Nay come, I pray thee, speak: good, good Nurse, speak.

Nurse. Jesu, what haste. Can you not stay awhile?

Do you not see that I am out of breath?

..... (II. v. 21ff.)

Again when she delivers the dreadful news of Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment, she does not tell Juliet in a straightforward way, but is so longwinded in giving the substance of her news that she allows Juliet to think that Romeo is killed, not Tybalt.

She has close emotional ties with Juliet, but her conscienceless character is revealed to her, as she grows into womanhood and gets moral power and spiritual passion. When Juliet asks the Nurse her advice on her forced marriage to Paris after Romeo's departure

to Mantua, she suggests the girl to abandon the banished Romeo and marry Paris. Hoping to win Juliet to her advice, she even praises Paris and speaks ill of Romeo. Then and there the old wretch is flung out of the heart of Juliet for ever, who bursts forth as soon as she is out of sight:

Ancient damnation! O most wicked fiend,
Is it more sin to wish me thus forsworn,
Or to dispraise my lord with that same tongue
Which she hath prais'd him with above compare
So many thousand times? Go, counsellor.
Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain. (III. v. 235-240)

It is, however, apparent that the Nurse genuinely loves Juliet. When Juliet has taken the sleeping potion and she discovers the girl in a trance that appears to be death, she wails in utter despair:

O woe! O woeful, woeful, woeful day.
Most lamentable day. Most woeful day
That ever, ever I did yet behold.
O day, O day, O day, O hateful day.
Never was seen so black a day as this.
O woeful day, O woeful day. (IV. V. 49-54)

Referring to the rejection of the Nurse, Goddard says, "unlike Falstaff, when he is rejected, she carries not one spark of our sympathy or pity with her... We scorn her as utterly as Juliet does."²¹⁾ But we can not expel her out of our heart so decisively. Of course, we do not approve of her, but it is difficult at least to get angry with her. She can rival Falstaff in broad humour, and her garrurity has its charm to us. Even her immorality is endurable, if we remember that the society in which she has lived, not her original nature, has brought it on her.

V. Friar Lawrence

Shakespeare was kind to friars, and Friar Lawrence is one of the best of them.²²⁾ He is trusted and respected by all Verona, as Capulet admits:

Now afore God, this reverend holy Friar,
All our whole city is much bound to him. (IV. ii. 31-32)

21) Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare, Vol. I* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 120.

22) Cf. Brooke, p. 53.

He is a confidant to the lovers; to Romeo a spiritual father since his childhood, and to Juliet a spiritual adviser. Even Paris calls at his cell for his advice. When he is apprehended for questioning at the close of the play, his statement is quietly listened to and Prince Escalus approves his innocence:

We still have known thee for a holy man. (V. iii. 269)

He is a charitable monk, but he is more a man of the world than a churchman. When Romeo tells him that he has forgotten Rosaline, he mocks at his fickleness of heart, but his speech is not rigid but rather gentle and humourous:

Holy Saint Francis! What a change is here!
 Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear,
 So soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies
 Not truly in their hearts but in their eyes.
 Jesu Maria! What a deal of brine
 Hath wash'd thy sallow cheeks for Rosaline.

..... (II. iv. 61ff.)

He still remembers his own youth, keepeng ancient tenderness for the lovers. At the sight of pretty Juliet, tender memories of his own youth burst into lovely poetry:

Here comes the lady. O, so light a foot
 Will ne'er wear out the everlasting flint.
 A lover may bestride the gossamers
 That idles in the wanton summer air
 And yet not fall; so light is vanity. (II. iv. 16-20)

His mind is not old, though his reasoning often makes him look so, and his tenderness is not confined to man only, extending even to inanimate objects.

He is a man of reason and philosopher, whose motto is moderation. To the lovers he appears in the main as a wise and friendly counsellor. He consents to perform their secret marriage, for he hopes to heal the feud between their families and thereby to restore the peace of the city which has been destroyed for long. Like an old man, he advises Romeo to moderate the impetuosity of his passion:

Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast. (II. iii. 90)

The same advice is repeated just before the marriage:

These violent delights have violent ends
 And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,

Which as they kiss consume. The sweetest honey
 Is loathsome in his own deliciousness,
 And in the taste confounds the appetite.
 Therefore love moderately; long love doth so.
 Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow. (II. iv. 9-15)

When Romeo, faced with banishment, blubbers in utter despair, rolling on the ground and drawing his sword to make away with himself, Friar Lawrence reproves his desperation and seeks to pull him together by warning him of the consequences of his conduct.

He is a medical botanist, who "mingles a rustic science with his poetic feeling."²³ He knows not only the properties of human loves but also of plants and minerals. He rejoices in gathering medicinal herbs and flowers in the early dawn when they are still wet with dew. He muses on the qualities of plants, and, comparing them with the nature of man, he broods on human life:

O mickle is the powerful grace that lies
 In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities.
 For naught so vile that on the earth doth live
 But to the earth some special good doth give;
 Nor aught so good but, strain'd from that fair use,
 Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.
 Virtue itself turns vice being misapplied,
 And vice sometime's by action dignified.

(II. iii. 11ff.)

Indeed, he is a many-natured man.

He plays an audacious part in the prescription of the sleeping potion for Juliet, and a cowardly part when he abandons her in the vault at the fatal moment. He is forgivable, however, for most of his actions are for what he considers the ultimate good. He is anxious to perpetuate the lovers' conjugal relationship, and because of this he conceives the plan to drug Juliet so that he may help her to prevent her bigamous marriage. Moreover his use of the potion can be regarded rather as a dramatic necessity in the play, which requires a tragic ending, than as his fault. Anyway he does his best to effect the best solution he can, and it is a tragic irony that his well-meaning plan miscarries.

23) *Ibid.*, p. 54.

