

# SPEAK THE SPEECH

ROMEO: *ROMEO & JULIET*

"BUT SOFT! WHAT LIGHT THROUGH  
YONDER WINDOW BREAKS?"

## Who's Romeo?

Romeo is a Montague, one of two prominent families in Verona. The Montagues are locked in a feud with another prominent family, the Capulets. At the beginning of the play, Romeo is suffering from 'love's heavy burden': in love with Rosaline, who doesn't share the same feelings.

## What's happening when this speech is spoken?

Romeo's cousin, Benvolio, suggests that they attend a masked ball hosted by the Capulet family because Rosaline will be there. At the party, Romeo sees Juliet, the only child of the Capulet family. Romeo and Juliet exchange words and a kiss, and they fall in love.

After the party, Romeo, not wanting to leave, hides from Benvolio and their friend Mercutio. After mocking Romeo about loving Rosaline, Mercutio gives up and leaves with Benvolio. Romeo says of Mercutio, "He jests at scars that never felt a wound," before noticing a light coming from a window that overlooks the courtyard.

## THE SPEECH

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

Who is already sick and pale with grief,

That thou her maid art far more fair than she:

Be not her maid, since she is envious;

Her vestal livery is but sick and green

And none but fools do wear it; cast it off.

It is my lady, O, it is my love!

O, that she knew she were!

She speaks yet she says nothing: what of that?

Her eye discourses; I will answer it.

I am too bold, 'tis not to me she speaks:

Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,

Having some business, do entreat her eyes

To twinkle in their spheres till they return.

What if her eyes were there, they in her head?

The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars,

As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven

Would through the airy region stream so bright

That birds would sing and think it were not night.

See, how she leans her cheek upon her hand!

O, that I were a glove upon that hand,

That I might touch that cheek!



## THE SPEECH: INDIVIDUAL THOUGHTS

Here's the speech, broken down into individual thoughts. Please note: this is just one way to breakdown the thoughts. It's subjective!

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Be not her maid;

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## WORDS & PHRASES (that might be new or have an unexpected meaning)

**But, soft** – this phrase is used to get someone's attention; it means hang on, be quiet

**yonder** – at some distance, yet within view

**breaks** – light can be said to break, or penetrate, darkness

**east** – the sun rises in the east

**maid** – this word can mean different things; here it means a servant or attendant

**fair** – the original meaning of this word was beautiful

**Vestal** – describes the priestesses who kept the sacred fire of purity at the Roman temple of Vesta

**livery** – the official clothing worn by an employee or servant

**cast it off** – take it off and throw it away

**discourses** – has a conversation

**entreat** – plead or persuade

**spheres** – the places held by stars

**the airy region** – the sky

# EXPLORE

Use your brain, your heart, your imagination, your voice and/or your movement to embody this character and express yourself through the words. Try it lots of different ways as you follow these prompts.

## ACTIVITY #1: EXPLORE THE LANGUAGE

### Explore the words

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- What do the words sound like?
- Are there any sounds that repeat?
- How many times does Romeo say 'O'? Does it mean the same thing every time?

### Explore the verse

- If you're able, speak the speech and throw a small ball or a rolled-up pair of socks as you say the last word of each verse line. It's a gentle toss, straight up in the air that you catch again. This is to give you an awareness of the end of the verse line. What do you notice? Do the thoughts end at the ends of the verse lines, or in the middle? Does it change at different points in the speech? Do they spill over?
- Now try speaking only the last word of each verse line and allow them to resonate with you. Some people believe that you can get a sense of the speech just from these words. What do you think?

## ACTIVITY #2: EXPLORE THE IDEAS

### Where's Juliet?

The original versions of Shakespeare's play don't indicate when Juliet actually appears at the window.

- Look closely at Romeo's speech. When do you think Juliet should appear? Note: don't assume that a printed edition of the play has the right answer. It might not.

### Who are you talking to?

Because of more contemporary ideas about theatre and film, many people think that when a character is alone on stage, they're talking to themselves, but the tradition was very different for Shakespeare. When Shakespeare's characters are alone on stage, they're usually talking to the audience.

- How does this change your sense of what's happening for Romeo in the scene?
- Look closely at Romeo's language. Are there times when Romeo is addressing someone or something other than the audience? When and who?



## ACTIVITY #3: EXPLORE THE CHARACTER



- Why do you think Romeo begins the play in love with someone else? Do you think this fact strengthens or weakens Romeo's love for Juliet? What might it tell us about Romeo's character? About Romeo's love?
- If you have access to the full play, notice the difference in the ways Romeo talks about love before and after meeting Juliet. How would you describe this?

Notice that a lot of Romeo's thoughts are very short.

- What is the effect of these short thoughts?
- What is the effect of the longer thoughts?
- How would you describe Romeo's state of mind in this speech?

## ACTIVITY #4: CHALLENGE THE WORDS

**Words change meaning over time...** The word 'fair' originally meant beautiful. In England at the time Shakespeare was writing, wealthy people started using toxic chemicals and harsh cosmetics to whiten their skin, and light skin became fashionable. Because of this fashionable association of light skin with beauty, the word 'fair' evolved to mean light skin. In Shakespeare's plays and poems, it's hard to tell which meaning of the word 'fair' is evoked and at times, it is clearly contrasted with 'black'.

Today, we each have our own associations with words based on our experiences.

- How do you feel about the word 'fair'?
- Would you prefer to use a different word as you make this speech your own?
- What words might you substitute that would still fit with the rhythm and metre of the speech?
- Are there other short (one-syllable) words that mean desirable or beautiful to you?

