



## A Closer Look at

# "But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?"

**This speech is spoken by Romeo in Act 2, Scene 2 of *Romeo & Juliet***

### 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'. Romeo is 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 in an orchard. Mercutio mocks Romeo for loving Rosaline, then 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 orchard.

*ROMEO:*

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 eye in heaven

Would through the airy region stream so bright

That birds would sing and think it were not night.

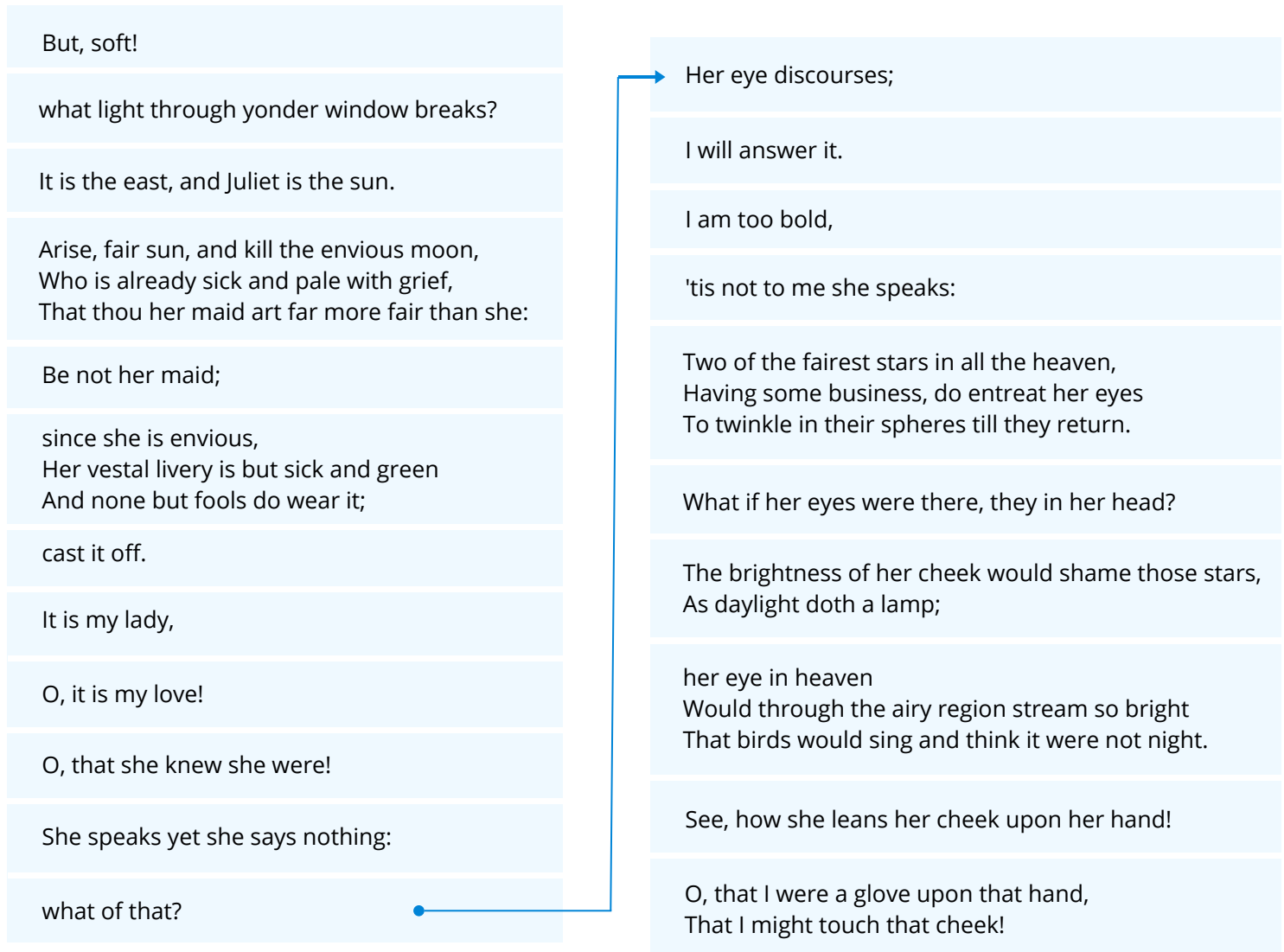
See, how she leans her cheek upon her hand!

O, that I were a glove upon that hand,

That I might touch that cheek!

## The speech: thought by thought

Shakespeare's language can be overwhelming, so it helps to break it down, thought by thought. Look at the speech again below, taking your time to make sense of each thought. This is a subjective process, so this example is just one way to break the speech down into thoughts. Would you do it differently?



## Words and 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 the language

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- If you're a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?
- What's the effect of this language?
- How many times does Romeo say "O"? Does it mean the same thing every time?
- Are the thoughts short and direct, or long and complex? Do they ever change? What might this tell you about what's happening for the character?

## 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.)

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### Who are you talking to?

Because of contemporary ideas about theatre and film, people often think that when a character is alone on stage, they're talking to themselves. In Shakespeare's time, though, the tradition was very different. 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?

## Explore the character

### What's love got to do with it?

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?
- What might it tell us 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. What do you notice?

## Challenge the words

Words change meaning over time. The word 'fair' originally meant beautiful. In England at the time Shakespeare was writing, lighter-coloured skin was associated with wealthy people who could avoid long hours working out in the sun and elements.

Because of its association with wealth, lighter-coloured skin became fashionable, and the word 'fair' evolved to mean light skin. In Shakespeare's plays and poems, it can sometimes be hard to tell which meaning of the word 'fair' is being evoked.

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

- How do you feel about the word 'fair' in this speech?
- Would you prefer to use a different word? Professional theatre directors and actors cut and change Shakespeare's language all the time, and have done so for centuries. There is even evidence that Shakespeare's own acting company made changes to his texts.
- With that in mind, what changes might you like to make to the text? 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?

## Make it your own

### Performance

**Learn some or all of the speech by heart and perform it.** Discover what it all means, and what it means to you, so you can truly make it your own. If you like, think about staging, costuming, props, lighting, etc. Share your work with an audience of family and/or friends.

**Ask someone to film your performance** so you have a record of it. They can either film your live performance, or you can create a special opportunity for filming. Collaborate to find the best location, lighting, camera angles, sound, titles, etc. for what you'd like to create.

### Art

**Create** a drawing, painting, sculpture, still life, photograph, or film that expresses what the speech means to you. Decide how you would like to share your creation.

### Music

**Express what the speech means to you through music.** Choose a song or piece of music, build a playlist, or even compose an original piece that conveys your feelings about the speech. Decide how you'd like to share what you've created.

### Creative Writing

**Compose your own poem, speech, or story inspired by the speech.** Imagine a similar situation of someone being surprised to find exactly what they most wanted. How would you describe the object of desire and convey the feelings the situation would inspire?

**How would you respond to Romeo?** Imagine Benvolio, Mercutio, or Juliet could hear this speech. How do you imagine they would respond? How would you respond as yourself? Write a response in the form of a poem, speech or story.