



A Closer Look at "Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds..."

This speech is spoken by Juliet in Act 3, Scene 2 of *Romeo & Juliet*.

Who's Juliet?

Juliet is the only child of the Capulet family, which is in a terrible feud with the Montague family. At the beginning of the play, Juliet's age is about 13 years, eleven months, and two weeks. It's the only time in any play that Shakespeare is so specific about a character's age.

Juliet is supposed to marry Paris, a relative of the Prince of Verona. Lord Capulet invites Paris to a masked ball to meet Juliet. At the party, though, Juliet instead meets Romeo Montague, who has snuck in (wearing a mask) to join in the festivities. Romeo and Juliet fall in love and decide to get married, in spite of their families' mutual hatred. With the help of Juliet's Nurse and Romeo's friend Friar Laurence, Juliet and Romeo marry in secret.

What's happening when this speech is spoken?

Earlier in the day, Juliet and Romeo have been married in secret. They have arranged for the Nurse to bring Juliet a rope ladder that Romeo can climb so that the new couple can spend the night together. Juliet is waiting for the Nurse to arrive.

JULIET:

Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
Towards Phoebus' lodging: such a wagoner
As Phaëthon would whip you to the west,
And bring in cloudy night immediately.
Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
That runaway's eyes may wink and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalk'd of and unseen.
Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own beauties; or, if love be blind,
It best agrees with night. Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match,
Play'd for a pair of stainless maidenhoods:
Hood my unmann'd blood, bating in my cheeks,
With thy black mantle; till strange love, grown bold,
Think true love acted simple modesty.
Come, night; come, Romeo; come, thou day in night;
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
Whiter than new snow upon a raven's back.
Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow'd night,
Give me my Romeo; and, when I shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.
O, I have bought the mansion of a love,
But not possess'd it, and, though I am sold,
Not yet enjoy'd: so tedious is this day
As is the night before some festival
To an impatient child that hath new robes
And may not wear them. O, here comes my nurse,
And she brings news; and every tongue that speaks
But Romeo's name speaks heavenly eloquence.

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?

Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
Towards Phoebus' lodging:

such a wagoner
As Phaëthon would whip you to the west,
And bring in cloudy night immediately.

Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
That runaway's eyes may wink and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalk'd of and unseen.

Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own beauties; or, if love be blind,
It best agrees with night.

Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match,
Play'd for a pair of stainless maidenhoods:

Hood my unmann'd blood, bating in my cheeks,
With thy black mantle;

till strange love, grown bold,
Think true love acted simple modesty.

Come, night;

come, Romeo;

come, thou day in night;
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.

Come, gentle night,

come, loving, black-brow'd night,

Give me my Romeo;

and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

O, I have bought the mansion of a love,
But not possess'd it, and, though I am sold,
Not yet enjoy'd:

so tedious is this day
As is the night before some festival
To an impatient child that hath new robes
And may not wear them.

O, here comes my nurse,
And she brings news;

and every tongue that speaks
But Romeo's name speaks heavenly eloquence.

Did you notice?

A little more than halfway through the speech, there's a sentence that begins, "Give me my Romeo..." In one version of the speech the next phrase is "...and when I shall die..." in the other version it's "...and when he shall die..." This represents the two different versions that appeared in the earliest editions of the play. What do you think about the difference? What does each choice reveal about Juliet's character? Which word would you choose?

Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

- **apace** - quickly
- **fiery-footed steeds** - horses with their feet on fire, either from running so fast or because they pull the sun across the sky
- **Phoebus' lodging** - the home (or lodging) of the ancient Greek sun god, Phoebus
- **wagoner** - the person who drives the horses pulling a wagon
- **Phaëthon** - Phoebus's son, who had a disastrous experience driving the sun god's chariot in an ancient Greek myth; this story might have been an attempt to explain wild fires
- **close** - one sense of the word is secret, or hidden from view
- **wink** - nowadays this involves a very specific action of closing one eye, often in a playful manner; for Shakespeare, this usually just meant to close, when referring to eyes
- **amorous** - having to do with love
- **rites** - rituals or customs often performed as part of a religious service
- **civil** - here it means decent and well-behaved
- **sober-suited** - wearing serious or somber clothing
- **matron** - this word is used to describe a mature woman, often in a position of authority
- **learn me** - an old-fashioned way of saying 'teach me'
- **maidenhoods** - the plural for virginity
- **Hood** - to cover, like with a hood
- **unmann'd** - a double meaning: untrained, and without a husband
- **bating** - fluttering or struggling with restless impatience
- **mantle** - a simple outer garment, like a wrap or a sleeveless cloak
- **strange** - here it means unfamiliar, unknown, or new
- **bold** - daring and fearless
- **acted** - carried out in action, performed
- **simple** - here it might mean honest, open, and sincere
- **modesty** - freedom from coarseness or arrogance
- **thou wilt** - you will
- **fine** - pure, perfect, of the best and highest quality
- **garish** - overly showy and gaudy
- **mansion** - originally the manor house of a great estate, now an impressively large house
- **tedious** - long and tiresome, annoying
- **but** - here it means 'only' or 'no more than'; this is pretty common in Shakespeare
- **eloquence** - the art of expressing thought to appeal to reason and to move feelings

Making sense of the images

Juliet describes many complex images. Here are some explanations of what the images might mean. Of course, other interpretations are also possible. What do you think?

**Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
Towards Phoebus' lodging:**

In ancient Greek mythology, the sun god Phoebus would pull the sun across the sky from east to west in a chariot. The horses, or steeds, presumably had fiery feet.

**such a wagoner
As Phaethon would whip you to the west,
And bring in cloudy night immediately.**

Phaethon was Phoebus' son. Phoebus makes the mistake of promising his son anything he asks for, and Phaethon insists on a chance to drive the sun chariot across the sky. Phaethon is young and inexperienced and can't control the horses, and the chariot races across the sky, out of control.

**Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
That runaway's eyes may wink and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalk'd of and unseen.**

Here we can imagine night like a curtain spreading, hiding things from view, so that even people who are sneaking around won't be able to see Romeo leap into Juliet's arms.

**Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own beauties; or, if love be blind,
It best agrees with night.**

The beauty of a lover provides its own kind of light. In the dark, there's no need for love to be able to see: the personification of love, Cupid, is often depicted blindfolded, and thus the saying goes, 'Love is blind'.

**Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match,
Play'd for a pair of stainless maidenhoods:
Hood my unmann'd blood, bating in my cheeks,
With thy black mantle;**

Here we can imagine night as a serious, well-behaved, authoritative woman dressed all in black who can teach Juliet how to win by losing; at the same time this matron can hide Juliet's blushing cheeks with her black garment.

**till strange love, grown bold,
Think true love acted simple modesty.**

This one is tricky. Maybe it means that until this new, unfamiliar love has become confident, Juliet wants the matron, Night, to think of this true love as honest and pure.

**Come, night; come, Romeo; come, thou day in night;
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.**

When Juliet calls Romeo a "day in night", we can imagine that Romeo is full of interior light that contrasts the darkness of night. This contrast is just as extreme as that between the colours of fresh white snow on a raven's dark back.

**and, when I shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.**

If Romeo is so full of light, imagine Romeo as stars lighting up the night sky so beautifully that no one pays attention to the sun's gaudy brightness anymore, preferring the beauty of the night sky instead.

Making sense of the images (continued)

**O, I have bought the mansion of a love,
But not possess'd it, and, though I am sold,
Not yet enjoy'd:**

Here Juliet compares this love to having bought a wonderful house but having not yet moved in. Juliet then identifies herself with the house.

**so tedious is this day
As is the night before some festival
To an impatient child that hath new robes
And may not wear them.**

In another metaphor, Juliet compares this waiting to see Romeo to being a child not able to wear new party clothes until the actual holiday comes.

**O, here comes my nurse, And she brings news;
and every tongue that speaks
But Romeo's name speaks heavenly eloquence.**

When the Nurse arrives with news of Romeo, it will be wonderful, because anyone who says anything about Romeo, even simply saying the name, is expressing blessed thoughts.

Explore the language

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex? Are they everyday words, or are they more extraordinary? What impression do you get of Juliet based on the choice of words?
- 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?
- 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 character

As you think about Juliet's situation – age, family situation, having met Romeo the night before and gotten married in secret that afternoon – what feelings come up for you? Have you ever had to wait for something you wanted right away?

Explore the ideas: Who is Juliet talking to?

Juliet is alone on stage for this speech. Many people assume that when Shakespeare's characters are alone on stage, they're speaking to themselves. However, this is a relatively new idea that came about hundreds of years after Shakespeare was writing. In Shakespeare's time, when characters were alone on stage, they were still speaking to someone, even if it's the audience.

Take a close look at the speech and see if you can tell to whom Juliet is speaking. In this speech, it changes with almost every thought.

(Hint: Juliet doesn't necessarily have to be talking to another person)

(Another hint: for Shakespeare's characters, if you can't tell who they're addressing, it's often the audience!)

Challenge the words

William Shakespeare wrote his plays and poems more than 400 years ago, and his experience of the world was different from ours today. This means we often find language that might be hurtful, offensive, or in other ways contradictory to our values. This presents an exciting challenge for theatre makers or others who are interpreting or thinking about Shakespeare's plays.

For example, about halfway through the speech, Juliet says this:

Come, night; come, Romeo; come, thou day in night;
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.

In the section above on making sense of the images, we offered an interpretation of these lines that Juliet's talking about Romeo's inner light. That's one way of thinking about it. Another interpretation is imagining that 'whiter' refers to the colour of Romeo's skin. We would advocate changing the word 'whiter' to one that allows you to imagine your ideal Romeo, without any limitation of physical appearance. What do you think? If you would change the word, what other words might work instead?

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 anticipation. How would you convey the feelings of excitement and anticipation? What language would you use to describe what your character is waiting for?

Do you have advice for Juliet in this moment? Write a response to the speech that expresses your thoughts on the subject. What form of writing would you like your response to take? How would you present it?