



What Happens in *Romeo & Juliet*

A tragedy by William Shakespeare

The play begins with a Chorus that sets the scene: two families, the Capulets and the Montagues, have revived an ancient feud, filling the streets of Verona with violent rivalry. A fight breaks out among the servants of the two households and escalates into a brawl. Escalus, the local ruler, declares that the punishment for further fighting will be death.

The Montagues are concerned about the safety of their child, Romeo, and ask Romeo's cousin, Benvolio, about Romeo's whereabouts. We hear that Romeo has been off alone lately, filled with sadness. Benvolio discovers the cause: unrequited love for someone named Rosaline.

Meanwhile, a young aristocrat named Paris has come to ask Capulet's permission to marry Capulet's child, Juliet. Capulet invites Paris to a party at their house that evening, so that Paris can woo Juliet. Capulet then gives a list of people to a servant, with instructions to invite them as well. The servant, however, can't read, so asks Romeo and Benvolio for help after seeing them by chance on the street. As they read the guest list to the servant, they discover that Rosaline will be at the party, so they decide to attend, hiding their identities with masks.

As the Capulets prepare for the party, Lady Capulet and the Nurse tell Juliet about Paris and about the idea of a marriage. Juliet agrees to meet Paris and see what happens. Romeo, Benvolio and their friend, Mercutio joke around on their way to the party.

At the party, Romeo and Juliet meet and fall instantly in love. However, Juliet's cousin Tybalt recognizes Romeo's voice and is outraged that a Montague would come to their party uninvited. Capulet stops Tybalt from disrupting the party, but Tybalt vows revenge on Romeo.

Romeo slips away from Mercutio and Benvolio to stay behind. In the Capulet family's orchard, Romeo sees Juliet looking out from a high window. They declare their love for one another and agree to get married the next day.

The couple plan a secret wedding ceremony. Romeo seeks help from Friar Laurence, while Juliet asks the Nurse to help. Immediately after the ceremony, Tybalt challenges Romeo to fight. Romeo declines, although can't reveal the reason: now that Romeo and Juliet are married, Tybalt has become family. Mercutio is outraged at Romeo's submission, and fights Tybalt for Romeo's sake. As Romeo tries to stop the fight, Tybalt fatally wounds Mercutio. Romeo immediately fights and kills Tybalt. Townspeople come out to see what has happened, including Escalus, who banishes Romeo.

After Romeo and Juliet secretly bid farewell, Juliet's parents arrive with news that they've arranged Juliet's marriage to Paris in a few days. When Juliet refuses this marriage, Capulet threatens to disown Juliet. The Nurse can only suggest that Juliet marry Paris and imagine Romeo is dead. Juliet asks for help from Friar Laurence, who makes a potion that will cause a sleep so deep it looks like death. The plan is simple: Juliet will take the potion and be placed in the family tomb. Friar Laurence will write to Romeo so that Romeo can be there when Juliet wakes up, and the couple can live in Mantua together until the time is right for everyone to welcome them back.

Juliet takes the potion and is placed into the tomb, but a Friar entrusted to deliver the letter to Romeo is unable to get to Mantua, so Romeo never hears that Juliet is secretly alive. Instead, Romeo's friend Balthasar reports that Juliet is dead. Romeo, overcome with grief, buys poison from an Apothecary, travels to Juliet's tomb and drinks the poison just before Juliet wakes up. Juliet awakens to find Romeo dead. The Friar tries to convince Juliet to come away to join a convent, but as they hear people coming, the Friar leaves and Juliet finds Romeo's dagger and uses it for suicide. With both the young lovers dead, Escalus talks to the Montague and Capulet families, saying their children's death is punishment for their feud and that "Heaven finds means to kill your joys with love."

A note about our style

We've adopted two key approaches when describing the events of the play. First, we've eliminated as much of the gendered language as possible. We'd like everyone to have the freedom to identify with any character that interests them. Second, we've done our best to simply describe the events, without offering too much about how characters might be feeling. Again, we want to provide room for your interpretations.

To learn more about the characters in the play, see our Discovery Zone resource, *Who's Who in Romeo & Juliet*.

Questions for you to consider

- What sort of setting do you imagine for the play? Think about time, place, and stylistic qualities.
- Choose a character you find especially interesting. What part of their story do you want to explore? How do you imagine the character feels about the different events in the story?
- What did you find surprising about the events in the play? Which parts would you find most interesting to see on stage? Which events would you want to bring to life?