

Romeo and Juliet

The Prologue

It is important to recognise that the prologue is a **Sonnet** - a form of poetry often (though not exclusively) associated with love. It has 3 quatrains (ABAB) and 1 rhyming couplet. This is a love story but without a happy ending.

PROLOGUE

Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
The which if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

We learn about the two families of equal status ('dignity') and where the story is set. Recently, the fighting and feud has erupted again ('ancient grudge break to new mutiny') and that, tragically, it is the citizens of Verona who are being killed and stained with the blood of fellow citizens. This is civil war rather than a militarised one.

The second stanza gives a view of the action of the play - it tells us that the 'star-crossed lovers' (lovers that were always destined to be together) will be killed. Only their death will end the 'strife' - the feuding - of both families. This indicates already the depth of the hatred and how tragic the consequences need to be before the fighting will end.

Simply Shakespeare's promise that this is what the audience will see on stage.

The sonnet's rhyming couplet - Shakespeare's last promise that if you listen and watch carefully, you will see how this action unfolds and has been created on stage.

The prologue serves a very clear **Dramatic** function: it gives an overall summary of the play but, more importantly, it enables the audience to anticipate action and tragedy. It is also a useful structural device, because the audience is reminded of it as the play develops.

Act 1 Scene 4

SCENE IV. A street.

Enter ROMEO, MERCUTIO, BENVOLIO, with five or six Maskers, Torch-bearers, and others

ROMEO

**What, shall this speech be spoke for our excuse?
Or shall we on without a apology?**

BENVOLIO

The date is out of such prolixity:
We'll have no Cupid hoodwink'd with a scarf,
Bearing a Tartar's painted bow of lath,
Scaring the ladies like a crow-keeper;
Nor no without-book prologue, faintly spoke
After the prompter, for our entrance:

**But let them measure us by what they will;
We'll measure them a measure, and be gone.**

ROMEO

**Give me a torch: I am not for this ambling;
Being but heavy, I will bear the light.**

MERCUTIO

Nay, gentle Romeo, we must have you dance.

ROMEO

Not I, believe me: you have dancing shoes
With nimble soles: I have a soul of lead
So stakes me to the ground I cannot move.

Romeo asks if they will need an excuse for being at the Capulet Ball. Does this reveal his lack of bravery and boldness? How does this sit in the masculine context of the play? He does then ask if they should just go without an apology - but the fact he asks suggests he is unsure.

Benvolio is a peacekeeper and does not wish to cause more trouble than is necessary. He says that they will go for their dance and leave. Benvolio, Mercutio and Romeo are **characters of contrast** - each offering a different dimension to the drama as it unfolds and, as such, they work as dramatic devices in their own right. Benvolio has explained how he expects some fun.

Romeo is melancholy and is spoiling the fun for the other characters. He is not in the mood for dancing because he is too affected by his love life. He is a **stereotypical hopeless lover** - a character type that the audience would recognise

Mercutio's first line here is a rejection of what has been said and a command. This reveals his attempt to persuade Romeo whose lack of masculinity and lack of fun is frustrating him.

Romeo uses **hyperbole** and **metaphor** when talking about the effect love has had on him - he has a soul of lead. There is a pun here - he is heavy so not for dancing.

MERCUTIO

You are a lover; borrow Cupid's wings,
And soar with them above a common bound.

ROMEO

**I am too sore enpierced with his shaft
To soar with his light feathers, and so bound,
I cannot bound a pitch above dull woe:
Under love's heavy burden do I sink.**

MERCUTIO

**And, to sink in it, should you burden love;
Too great oppression for a tender thing.**

ROMEO

Is love a tender thing? it is too rough,
Too rude, too boisterous, and it pricks like thorn.

MERCUTIO

**If love be rough with you, be rough with love;
Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down.**

Give me a case to put my visage in:
A visor for a visor! what care I
What curious eye doth quote deformities?
Here are the beetle brows shall blush for me.

Romeo continues to be melancholy and use a very exaggerated, romantic and hyperbolic style of speech. He explains that he cannot borrow cupid's wings as Mercutio suggested because he has been too badly injured by Cupid's arrow. A great deal of romantic love imagery here. A sense of **foreshadowing** - the prologue has promised tragedy and this scene develops it.

Mercutio switches tactics here and begins using more **sexualised humour**. His main point is that Romeo is taking himself way too seriously; however, it does reveal that Mercutio takes on a role similar to **the fool** - he serves a dramatic function to lighten the mood.

Romeo still takes himself too seriously but provides the opportunity for Mercutio's next joke...

Mercutio again uses **sexualised humour/ sexual innuendo**. He does not have the same view of love that Romeo has. He thinks that Romeo's problems would be solved or minimised if he could get have sex.

Petrarchan Lover v The Sceptic

Romeo is a typical **Petrarchan Lover** - he is in love with the idea of love & idolises the object of his desires. His love is unrequited. Mercutio is a sceptic and is more cynical about love. He **judges** Romeo for it.

BENVOLIO

Come, knock and enter; and no sooner in,
But every man betake him to his legs.

ROMEO

A torch for me: let wantons light of heart
Tickle the senseless rushes with their heels,
**For I am proverb'd with a grandsire phrase;
I'll be a candle-holder, and look on.**

The game was ne'er so fair, and I am done.

MERCUTIO

**Tut, dun's the mouse, the constable's own word:
If thou art dun, we'll draw thee from the mire
Of this sir-reverence love, wherein thou stick'st
Up to the ears. Come, we burn daylight, ho!**

ROMEO

Nay, that's not so.

MERCUTIO

I mean, sir, in delay
We waste our lights in vain, like lamps by day.
Take our good meaning, for our judgment sits
Five times in that ere once in our five wits.

ROMEO

And we mean well in going to this mask;
But 'tis no wit to go.

Romeo uses old proverbs to continue his sense of melancholy. He says he will be the candle holder and look on - in other words a person cannot lose if they don't play. He is **defeatist** whereas Mercutio is more determined (though Mercutio's intentions might not be that noble).

Mercutio is losing his patience. He says that love is nonsense and he is stuck in the mud up to his ears. Romeo is wasting their time and he is eager to go!

Consider the contrasts between Romeo and Mercutio:

- Petrarchan Lover(Hopeless) v Cynical
- Avoiding fun v Craving fun
- Unmanly v Judges lack of masculinity
- Ruled by the heart v Ruled (so far) by the head
- Passive v Active

Although they are friends, Romeo and Mercutio seem to be in a constant state of **struggle** (think about how this serves as a dramatic device).

MERCUTIO

Why, may one ask?

ROMEO

I dream'd a dream to-night.

MERCUTIO

And so did I.

ROMEO

Well, what was yours?

MERCUTIO

That dreamers often lie.

ROMEO

In bed asleep, while they do dream things true.

Romeo and Mercutio have different perceptions. Romeo is a lover and places a great significance on dreams. Mercutio thinks that dreams cannot be trusted.



MERCUTIO

O, then, I see **Queen Mab** hath been with you.
She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an **agate-stone**
On the fore-finger of an alderman,
Drawn with a team of little atomies
Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep;
Her wagon-spokes made of long spiders' legs,
The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,
The traces of the smallest spider's web,
The collars of the moonshine's watery beams,
Her whip of cricket's bone, the lash of film,
Her wagoner a small grey-coated gnat,
Not so big as a round little worm
Prick'd from the lazy finger of a maid;
Her chariot is an empty hazel-nut
Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,
Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers.
And in this state she gallops night by night
Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love,
O'er courtiers' knees, that dream on court'sies straight,
O'er lawyers' fingers, who straight dream on fees,
O'er ladies' lips, who straight on kisses dream,
Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues,

Mercutio's speech draws on a wide range of imagery; however, it is motivated by his belief that Romeo is simply being silly. He aims to show how unreliable dreams are.



Consider why Shakespeare gave such a lot of stage time to Mercutio here.

Tiny, insignificant, lacking substance.

The audience would recognise a range of possible interpretations here - demonstrating his main point that dreams are not reliable. It also reveals Mercutio's incredible level of wit and intelligence. 'Queen' and 'Mab' were both slang terms for harlots. 'Mab' also referred to a clumsily dressed woman. There is a very clear suggestion here that Romeo has been dreaming about undesirable women which is Mercutio's way of challenging the value of love (which of course Romeo would strongly refute). In addition, there is the main interpretation that she was Queen of the fairies (Celtic) - the fact she is the midwife is Mercutio's way of explaining next how dreams are born.

Lovely, developed imagery here. Mercutio is deliberately building a rich but complicated image to show the complexity and contradiction of dreaming.

Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are:
Sometime she gallops o'er a courtier's nose,
And then dreams he of smelling out a suit;
And sometime comes she with a tithe-pig's tail
Tickling a parson's nose as a' lies asleep,
Then dreams, he of another benefice:
Sometime she driveth o'er a soldier's neck,
And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats,
Of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades,
Of healths five-fathom deep; and then anon
Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,
And being thus frightened swears a prayer or two
And sleeps again. This is that very Mab

**That plats the manes of horses in the night,
And bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs,
Which once untangled, much misfortune bodes:**

This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
That presses them and learns them first to bear,
Making them women of good carriage:
This is she--

Queen Mab is also suggested to be the creator of havoc and mischief - if this is the case, Mercutio is suggesting that taking dreams too seriously is foolish and could potentially lead to misfortune. Could this be another instance of foreshadowing - Romeo follows his dreams and lack of logic to his tragic death.

Mercutio continues his **imagery**, giving examples that dreamers often think that dreams are some sort of wish-fulfilment. This is to contrast Romeo's suggestion that dreams are a sort of prophesy (future seeing). He has used imagery to undermine dreaming and **presents it as a set of conflicting and confusing images** with no substance, derived from insignificant events. This links to his earlier suggestion that 'dreamers often lie' and later that dreams are 'as thin of substance as the air'.

At GRADE BOOSTER

You might consider the way Mercutio presents his views on women and how these **contrast** the views of women that Romeo has.

Also, you might consider Mercutio's views on women in light of the Baz Luhrmann interpretation, especially Mercutio's very feminine attire.

ROMEO

Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!
Thou talk'st of nothing.

MERCUTIO

True, I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,
Which is **as thin of substance as the air**
And more inconstant than the wind, who woos
Even now the frozen bosom of the north,
And, being anger'd, puffs away from thence,
Turning his face to the dew-dropping south.

BENVOLIO

This wind, you talk of, blows us from ourselves;
Supper is done, and we shall come too late.

ROMEO

I fear, too early: for my mind misgives
Some consequence yet hanging in the stars
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
With this night's revels and expire the term
Of a despised life closed in my breast
By some vile forfeit of untimely death.
But He, that hath the steering of my course,
Direct my sail! On, lusty gentlemen.

BENVOLIO

Strike, drum.

Romeo is frustrated by Mercutio's argument. His calls for peace are, in a way, ironic as peace is certainly something his actions do not create later in the play. Also, 'Thou talk'st of nothing' demonstrates Shakespeare's linguistic wit - Mercutio wanted Romeo to know that dreams are 'nothing' whereas Romeo thinks Mercutio is talking rubbish.

Mercutio, being told he is annoying and frustrating Romeo, continues to hammer the point home. Dreams are useless and have no substance. In short, he is demanding that Romeo gets a grip!

This is a key example of foreshadowing - Romeo's speech here predicts what is going to happen in the rest of the play. A 'consequence' is 'hanging in the stars' (in other words, mapped out by fate) which is going to begin on that date because Romeo and Juliet will meet each other at the party. We also know it is going to lead to an 'untimely death' for many of the characters. The conversation (relationship) between Romeo and Mercutio has drawn out this scene of the future and it is, therefore, a key dramatic and structural device.

This is a key **STRUCTURAL** Device - the speech from Romeo echoes the Prologue in which the future of the characters were clearly mapped out. The scene serves a dramatic function to develop the relationship between the characters whilst, to lighten the mood in places and to end by subtly reminding the audience of the main tragedy to come.

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