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A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

William Shakespeare
ROMEO AND JULIET

TEXT OF THE PLAY

SOURCES, CONTEXTS,
AND EARLY REWRITINGS

CRITICISM AND LATER REWRITINGS

Edited by

GORDON McMULLAN
KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

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Introduction

Romeo and Juliet is arguably the best-known play in the Shakespeare canon, better-known even than *Hamlet. Hamlet*, though, is generally considered to be *deep*: very apparently, it has a series of mysteries at its heart—plot, character, psychology, meaning, origins, texts—all of which have, at one point or another in the course of the history of people going to see it in the theater or reading it on the page, been the subject of puzzlement and uncertainty and a great deal of philosophical reflection. Not so *Romeo and Juliet,* which—as we all know—is a straightforward romantic boy-meets-girl story with action, comic elements, and a movingly tragic conclusion. Or so we think. The celebrated literary critic Frank Kermode thought otherwise, however, and I wholeheartedly agree with him, taking his assertion about the play as the moral of this Norton Critical Edition. *"Romeo and Juliet,"* he stated, "is not a simple play; to suppose that it is would be the most elementary mistake one could make concerning it." This is an enormously valuable statement about the play, underlining as it does the need for readers and theatergoers to come to *Romeo and Juliet* afresh and to read it not only for its appealing simplicities but also for its wonderfully productive complexities.

Generations of students who have been obliged to read *Romeo and Juliet* in high school—often in their very early teens—have tended not to think of it as a complicated play—as anything but, in fact—but that is because their teachers chose it for them as a first experience of Shakespeare that would not be too daunting: more fun than *Julius Caesar,* less gory than *Macbeth.* And in many ways the play is exactly right for this role: it is fast-moving, funny, engaging, tragic, sentimental, sexy, and colorful; it draws teenage readers and audience members into the story and requires them to relate to one or other of its protagonists, depending on their gender and orientation; and in the second half of the twentieth century it was made into two very fine and engaging movies—by Franco Zeffirelli and by Baz Luhrmann—which continue to enable the new reader of Shakespeare to discover the pleasures of performance. Yet *Romeo and Juliet* is also, I wish to argue, a play that, as you progress through life, repays repeated revisiting, as it begins to dawn on you that the

way the younger generation in the play behaves is not so different from the way the older generation behaves and that the two are catastrophically wrapped up with each other. Revisiting is something that does not always happen—all too often the play is omitted from university Shakespeare course schedules precisely because students have already studied it in high school—which is a genuine pity, because *Romeo and Juliet* is a play that rewards critical engagement at so many levels, a play whose richness only begins to become truly apparent as the reader's or theatergoer's knowledge—of history, of genre, of desire, of death—grows and changes and matures. If I have a hope for this Norton Critical Edition, it is that, whatever stage of your education or life you have reached when you first read *Romeo and Juliet*, you will return to it more than once in future years. I believe it will reward you in fascinatingly different ways each time you do so.

The play itself plays powerful games with the generations. The opening scene—pp. 4–12 in this Norton Critical Edition—sets the tone. It begins with young testosterone-driven men conversationally competing with each other to assert their masculinity in terms that would have been familiar to the audience as a negotiation between action and restraint. "I strike quickly, being moved," boasts the Capulet servant Samson, foregrounding his assumed role as Man of Action, to which his sidekick Gregory replies, "But thou art not quickly moved to strike," ironically emphasizing instead Samson's restraint as Man of Temperance. Samson insists, saying, "I will take the wall of any man or maid of Montague's," that is, he will claim higher social status over anyone from the Montague household, whether servant or master, man or woman, by insisting on passing them on the side further away from the dirt that would have built up in the roads in this period; it would be normal for the lower-status person (and Samson is at the bottom of the pile) to move to the street side. "That shows thee a weak slave, for the weakest goes to the wall," retorts Gregory, playing with the proverbial expression "the weak goest to the wall," meaning that he is too weak to stand on his own feet and needs a wall to lean against. His words in turn prod Samson into punning back and boasting of his manliness in two respects—his fighting prowess with men and his sexual prowess with women: " 'Tis true," he says, "and therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall; therefore I will push Montague's men from the wall and thrust his maids to the wall" (1.1.18–22). Here, Samson picks up on St. Peter's assertion in a book of the New Testament, First Peter 3:7, that women are "weaker vessels" than men—an expression used over the centuries to support the belief that women are leaky containers for fluids and for babies—claiming that he will shove the men of the Montague household into the mud

of the street and push their women up against the wall and rape them. Gregory, apparently a little uncomfortable with the shift from brawling to sex, notes that "[t]he quarrel is between our masters and us their men"—suggesting that family feuds should not involve women—and Samson replies: "When I have fought with the men, I will be civil with the maids—I will cut off their heads" (1.1.26–28)—an escalation of violence through his glossing of "heads" as "maidenheads," that is, hymens. Thus he sets himself up as a sexual tyrant who will rape virgins, and he finishes the conversation with a phallic joke: "Me they shall feel while I am able to stand"—that is, have an erection—"and 'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh," which Gregory picks up on, as soon as he sees a Montague servant, by punning on penis and sword: "Draw thy tool!" he cries. So fighting and raping seem much the same, conversationally speaking.

So much for the servants of the Montagues and the Capulets; so much for working-class masculinity in the play. But class, atypically in Shakespeare, turns out to have little to do with it, since the moment Tybalt enters, any sense we may have picked up from Benvolio's intervention (whose name ironically means "goodwill" or "well-meaning") that the aristocrats will be better behaved than their servants is rapidly dismissed. Tybalt is dangerous, inflammable, murderous: "Look upon thy death," he tells Benvolio. (And, later, Romeo turns out the same way, murdering the murderer.) The scene thus escalates socially—and then we find that the older generation are no different from either their servants or the younger members of the two households, that the rhetoric of violent masculinity crosses all status boundaries and marks out the aging Montague and Capulet males as no different behaviorally from their children or staff. "What noise is this?" asks Old Capulet, and then, when he sees what is happening, demands "Give me my long sword," an order that does at least two things—it marks him out comically as both old-fashioned (long swords were medieval, not Renaissance, weapons) and somewhat optimistic about his masculine prowess: his wife caustically suggests his longsword days are over and what he needs is a crutch. At this point Old Montague enters with his sword out, and Old Capulet is furious: "Old Montague is come / And flourishes his blade in spite of me" (1.1.87–88). Not only does this repartee suggest an endless escalation of phallic puns, it also makes clear that the idea parodied in Samson and Gregory's banter—that there might be two negotiable cultural versions of masculinity, the impulsive Man of Action and the restrained Man of Temperance—is naïve in every social respect, since the norm for the men in this play, whatever their status, is to reject manly restraint out of hand and look, at every opportunity, to incite or imagine violence and, specifically, sexual violence.

We encounter Romeo within this context—one that he is wholly unable, despite his best efforts once he has been transformed by meeting and falling in love with Juliet, to escape. Masculinity is negotiated in the play not as something fixed and unchanging but as the product of stereotypes and subject-positions—that is, of stances adopted in respect of the self rather than anything innate. Romeo's identity is initially constructed from conventions of courtly love for the impossible object of desire, something many in his audience would have recognized from the poetry of Petrarch and the English sonneteers (including Shakespeare) who wrote in Petrarch's wake; he then adapts to a version of desire that appears to allow for physical and emotional fulfillment. Romeo's own masculinity is simultaneously established and put into question by his opening obsession with the "fair Rosaline"—"A madness most discreet, / A choking gall, and a preserving sweet" (1.1.203–04). Benvolio's frank argument that all Romeo needs to do is find another beautiful woman to fall for—"Tut, man," he says: "one fire burns out another's burning, / One pain is lessened by another's anguish [. . .]. Take thou some new infection to thy eye, / And the rank poison of the old will die" (1.2.48–49, 52–53)—seems terribly cynical to Romeo at this moment, but this is precisely what happens: once Romeo sees Juliet, he instantly forgets about Rosaline—and we, the audience, never quite forget this. But his language at first is not that of the individual in love but of the stereotyped courtly lover he is playing; it is a *role*, crucially, not an innate identity. Benvolio, adopting the language of Romeo's genre, suggests that he should "compare" Rosaline's "face with some that I shall show, / And will make thee think thy swan a crow" (1.2.93–94), and Romeo, outraged, answers exactly according to the courtly love script:

> When the devout religion of mine eye
> Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to fire,
> And these, who, often drowned, could never die,
> Transparent heretics, be burnt for liars.
> One fairer than my love? The all-seeing sun
> Ne'er saw her match since first the world begun. (1.2.95–100)

Benvolio's urge to make comparisons is familiar enough to anyone who knows Shakespeare's sonnets—"My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," say, or the best-known of all of them, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"—and in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare seems wilfully to refuse to differentiate between his two vocations: poet and playwright. Here the language of the sonnet—and in particular the language of courtly love as renegotiated for the sonnet form—is made the material of theater.

This is at its most apparent when Romeo and Juliet meet. One of the grand moments in the history of romantic love, the free, untrammelled meeting of the two great dramatic lovers in all the innocence of their youthful, mutual desire, this moment it is, in fact, however, a little more complicated, a little more verbally shaped, than that might make it sound. The lines are some of the most famous in all of Shakespeare's plays:

ROMEO If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.
JULIET Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.
ROMEO Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?
JULIET Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.
ROMEO Oh, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;
They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.
JULIET Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.
ROMEO Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.
Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged.
JULIET Then have my lips the sin that they have took.
ROMEO Sin from thy lips? Oh, trespass sweetly urged!
Give me my sin again.
JULIET You kiss by the book. (1.4.208–25)

This is, as you will perhaps have noticed, an extended sonnet. In other words, this conversation—so free, so natural, so much the spontaneous dialogue of two instantly infatuated young people—is in fact circumscribed, rhetorically speaking: for one thing, the language the young sonneteers use depends upon a series of overtly Catholic images—pilgrims, priests, saints, sin—which, while contextually appropriate to the play's setting in early sixteenth-century Verona, would have made uncomfortable listening for at least some of the Protestant members of the audience—a discomfort brought to a head much later when Juliet describes Romeo as "the god of my idolatry" (2.1.156). (Good Christian girls shouldn't treat boys as idols to worship, and any girl who talks naturally of saints and pilgrims might well sound idolatrous to the more vehement kinds of Protestant.) Moreover, the conversation follows the precise rules required for the construction of a sonnet: the alternating rhymes, the Petrarchan form, the various technical requirements. Mercutio has already forewarned us of Romeo's relationship with the sonnet: "Now is he for the numbers that Petrarch flow'd in" (2.3.45–46), he

notes dismissively, reminding us that to adopt a genre underlines the fact that others have been there before you.

Gayle Whittier (see pp. 211–28) has valuably shown the extent of the immersion of the play in the sonnet world, mapping Romeo's progress as a trainee sonneteer. First, the fledgling poet offers seven lines toward a sonnet:

> Why, then, O brawling love! O loving hate!
> O anything, of nothing first create!
> O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
> Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms,
> Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,
> Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!
> This love feel I, that feel not love in this. (1.1.186–92)

This is a rather cumbersome effort, but it shows him in training, as it were, so that when he meets Juliet and a superior form of desire envelops him, Romeo has served his apprenticeship and is ready for his masterpiece, which he creates jointly with her. That she likewise has learned to read the world by way of Petrarch is apparent when she says of Romeo, in a kind of negative blazon (that is, the listing of the parts of the beloved's body), "What's Montague? It is nor hand nor foot, / Nor arm nor face, nor any other part / Belonging to a man" (2.1.82–84). So they are both familiar with the Petrarchan mode, which explains the ease with which they create their mutual sonnet—which in turn serves as a verbal demonstration of the natural accomplishment we can imagine in their eventual lovemaking. Even at this moment of supreme mutual expression, though, the rules of patriarchy must be observed: in the creation of the sonnet it is Romeo who leads (as in a dance) and Juliet who follows or "counters"; and, since the poem is in a certain sense a competition, it is a Romeo who is the manly winner, Juliet who submits, graceful and feminine. At the same time, Juliet's coy reference to an "other part / Belonging to a man" suggests that she is more knowing than Romeo might assume.

The sonnet that Romeo and Juliet co-create serves both to reinforce the naturalness of their mutual attraction and to mark out the cultural constructedness of "natural" desire. The poem establishes a relationship between the sexes in which the woman is the holy object of devotion and the man the pilgrim worshipper and so on the one hand defines masculinity and femininity in terms both religiously absolute and debatable (since the audience, whatever their residual attachment to their erstwhile Catholicism, will certainly have felt at least ambivalent about the phrasing) and on the other affirms the dominance of the male over the female; it serves also to lead us steadily toward the social crisis of tragedy, with Mercutio's

prior warnings against such relationships as the ominous backdrop. Most painfully of all, the language of the sonnet reappears later at the moment of greatest crisis, when Romeo, holding in his arms what he believes is Juliet's corpse, describes the evidence of his eyes: "Beauty's ensign yet / Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks, / And Death's pale flag is not advanced there" (5.3.94–96). Thinking he is simply using poetic language, he is in fact stating the physiological truth. The sonnet, then, is embedded at key moments both in the plot and in the establishment of the identities of the lovers: it foregrounds both the beauty of the moment and its dependence not on "natural," "spontaneous" mutual desire but on modes of thinking about the sexual other that are shaped verbally in ways that the audience would recognize but would associate with contexts other than theater. And it functions to negotiate the transition from comedy (the drama of desire) to tragedy (the drama of death).

As Dympna Callaghan notes (see pp. 282–304), Shakespeare's main source for *Romeo and Juliet*—Arthur Brooke's *Tragicall History of Romeous and Juliet,* published in 1562 (two years before Shakespeare was born)—has an underlying moral which Shakespeare seems to reject and which is quite different from what we have come to understand as the "meaning" of the play. The "star-cross'd lovers" prologue points us in a certain direction: "star-cross'd lovers" cannot be blamed for what happens to them because it is their destiny; their love is "death-marked" because of their families' longstanding feud, with "ancient grudge" and "parents' rage." It is not their fault in any way. Yet Brooke saw things quite differently. "To this end," he writes, "is this tragicall matter written, to describe unto thee a couple of unfortunate lovers thralling themselves to unhonest desire, neglecting the authority and advice of parents and friends"—that is, the blame, for Brooke, lies fairly and squarely with Romeo and Juliet themselves for "neglecting the authority [. . .] of parents," for "thralling" (that is, enslaving) "themselves to unhonest desire"—in other words, for transgressing social codes, for failing to honor father and mother, for unchastity. Which is not how we have come to view the plot at all. It can be a shock to realize that the story Shakespeare inherited meant something quite different to its first readers than it has come to mean for us.

Callaghan outlines the place *Romeo and Juliet* has had over the last few centuries in the creation and maintenance of what she calls "the ideology of romantic love," that is, in the invention of something that we tend to take entirely for granted—that two people of different sexes meet, fall in love, and become as one in a relationship appointed, as it were, by higher powers. This ideology—despite the everyday evidence of separation, divorce, and domestic violence—continues to operate and is at its most marked, in Western culture,

in horrified reactions to the practice of arranged marriage, anathema to most Western Christians or post-Christians but perfectly normal to millions of people in other cultures, and of course it is an arranged marriage that poses the direct threat to the lovers' happiness in *Romeo and Juliet*. But we have to understand that what we understand to be "universal" is often actually "local" in the sense of being culturally or geographically specific, and the argument of Callaghan and the social theorists whose work she invokes is that romantic love should be understood not as a given, as something "natural," as the kind of relationship to which all people everywhere aspire, but rather as a construct, as a cultural phenomenon created in history in certain specific locales—as something, in fact, created somewhere between the Middle Ages and now and perhaps specifically in Shakespeare's time. Certainly *Romeo and Juliet* has become, over time, the absolute embodiment, the tragic paradigm, of romantic love, the story of two young people who fall in love but whose lives are destroyed by the social pressures that refuse to let them achieve their desires. For Callaghan, it is slightly different. *Romeo and Juliet*, she argues,

> was written at the historical moment when the ideologies and institutions of desire—romantic love and the family, which are now for us completely naturalized—were being negotiated. Indeed, the play consolidates a certain formation of desiring subjectivity attendant upon Protestant and especially Puritan ideologies of marriage and the family required by, or at least very conducive to the emergent economic formation of, capitalism. (59; see p. 283)

In other words, what we take for granted now—an ideal of romantic love that presumes that we are heterosexual, that we can exercise choice, and that we are seeking to establish a self-contained family unit—was something that was being created in Shakespeare's day in response both to the Reformation—the turning inward of the external authority of the church—and to the emergence of capitalism as the dominant economic mode of the West: the establishment of markets, privilege for those with capital, and varying levels of choice dependent upon economic status. (If you want to see a contemporary instance of the nexus of romantic love and capitalism, you only have to look at the cover of this Norton Critical Edition, a detail from the graffiti wall at the supposed "Juliet's House" in Verona, which demonstrates graphically the primacy of the Romeo and Juliet story in the global discourse of romantic love: young tourist couples flock to Verona, thereby producing vast income for the city, to visit a building which may be—but probably isn't—the house once lived in by the Capulets and to stand on "Juliet's balcony," which was

in fact added to the building centuries later.) Romeo and Juliet's mutual desire marks the consolidation of a mindset that is so natural for us that it is hard to imagine a time prior to its existence—yet the play was written at the very beginning of this way of thinking.

The emergence of this discourse of limited, legitimized desire did not take place without resistance, however, and Shakespeare recognizes this. There is one figure in the play who is not defined in sonnet terms and whose relationship both to the norms established by romantic love and to normative masculinity is deeply ambivalent. This figure—who most markedly both embodies and crosses the boundaries of masculinity in the play and is thus its most troubling figure—is Mercutio. Mercutio arguably represents a homosocial principle that counters the normative heterosexuality of the young lovers. By "homoerotic," I mean the kind of male bonding that creates and sustains patriarchy—not necessarily what we in the early twenty-first century would call *homosexual* behavior, but its social counterpart, the kind of preference displayed by men for men, along with associated forms of misogyny, characteristic of certain team sports or professional associations or fraternities. Mercutio's relationship to Romeo is very much of this kind. He is king of the phallic pun, relentless with his erection jokes: "Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down," he argues; "This drivelling love is like a great natural that runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole" (1.4.26; 2.3.105–06). In the process, he lets slip his own investment (as one critic has put it) in Romeo's erection. He seems, in fact, to be in the same position but gender-reversed, as several of the young women in Shakespeare's early comedies—Hermia and Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* for instance—who express their sadness at the loss of friendship that necessarily happens when their childhood girlfriends acquire boyfriends and fiancés. Mercutio mocks Romeo's desire for Rosaline and typically reduces that desire to the purely physical, the exclusively sexual—"I conjure thee," he cries, "by Rosaline's bright eyes, / By her high forehead and her scarlet lip, / By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh, / And the demesnes that there adjacent lie" (that is, her genitalia) (2.1.17–20). Thus Mercutio, deploying the poetic blazon to objectify the female body, elides any suggestion that actual emotion is involved in desire between men and women, insisting that it is only relations between men that are emotionally fulfilling.

In the process, not surprisingly, he crosses the line repeatedly into misogyny. The best-known instance of this is his Queen Mab speech:

> MERCUTIO Oh, 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,
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 frighted swears a prayer or two
And sleeps again. This is that very Mab
That plaits 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—

ROMEO Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!
Thou talk'st of nothing. (1.4.51–94)

It is a remarkable speech. It defines female sexuality as monstrous, scary, disruptive. Midwives were a significant source of stress to early modern men, since they had privileged access to a key moment in a woman's life from which men were excluded. The many folktales

involving midwives exchanging children at birth, with parents bringing up monsters ("changelings") while the midwives bring up princes and princesses as peasants or, more simply, destroy the newborn children, all testify to patriarchal fears and fantasies of the mysteries of childbirth. Mercutio's language is the language of misogyny: "hag" and "slut" and, implicitly, "witch." And he offers a mechanistic image of sex: women are "carriages"; they "bear" (both men and children). His images are those of nightmares (another negative female image, the night-mare), and Queen Mab herself is an ambivalent creature, attractive but perversely powerful. And, in the end, the nightmare he evokes gets to Romeo, who has his first inkling (even as Mercutio would pull his friend away from his tragic trajectory) of the tragedy to come: "my mind misgives," he says.

Mercutio's imaginings are catching. He offers, on the subject of desire, a different perspective from that of the sonnet writers and of those, like Romeo and Juliet, who adopt the language of the sonnet to express their emotions. The blazon was a standard element in sonnet writing and the objectifying of the female body was part and parcel of the sonneteer's armory, but the overtness of Mercutio's misogyny is a little different from the courtly love language of the sonnets, as is his homoerotic expression—though Shakespeare himself wrote sonnets to a young man as well as to women, so the gendering of the object of affection in the sonnet itself is not as straight as you might expect—in which case Mercutio perhaps does some of the work within the frame of *Romeo and Juliet* that the "young man" sonnets do within the frame of Shakespeare's sonnets, both confirming and questioning the available generic categories. Either way, Mercutio offers a discomfort in the play that can be removed only by death.

As I hope these brief analyses of the opening scene, of the meeting of the romantic protagonists, and of Mercutio's Queen Mab speech make clear, *Romeo and Juliet* is, as Frank Kermode points out, not a "simple play." It is a play that is rich in possibilities for the critic, opening up a vast space of cultural experience and understanding between then and now and at the same time enabling us to see the ways in which how we think now, what we take for granted culturally in the early twenty-first century, are the product of histories that have unfolded between Shakespeare's time and our own. It is a play that explores youth and old age, masculinity and femininity, love and violence, individuality and sociability, language and the visual, poetry and theater. Its plot and characterizations underline for us the interconnectedness of a life led in society, within cultural norms, within codes of behavior and belief; it marks out the choices and absences of choice to which we are subject; and it expresses these things both in exquisite dialogue—as when Romeo and Juliet's first

conversation forms a perfect sonnet—and in disturbing monologue—as when Mercutio rails against what, for him, is the generative and thus disruptive role in a world he would prefer to be singly gendered—and it is the power of this language, above all, that draws us back to the play again and again. *Romeo and Juliet* has invited reimagining from the very beginning—the play is, after all, itself a reimagining of earlier versions of the story—and it continues to inspire writers, critics, theater directors, filmmakers, and all of us to address it afresh from the perspective of our own moment.

I have chosen so far to draw out threads from *Romeo and Juliet* by addressing just some aspects of the play's astonishingly rich first act. I hope, as you read through the entire play, that you will be able to see for yourself how these threads ramify and interweave as the plot develops and how, by the end of the play, the tragedy reaches its conclusion as a direct result of the social, cultural, and rhetorical tensions these opening scenes have established in the audience's consciousness. I have already cited a few of the critics whose work is included later in this Norton Critical Edition, and part of my intention has been quietly to underline that, for all of the pleasure and value that comes from approaching the play yourself with your own set of expectations and experiences and with your own knowledge of the world, there is also real value in seeing how critics have, across the centuries, understood this wonderful play and drawn out lines of engagement, which can be very satisfying to pick up and pursue for yourself. As ever with criticism, you read it not simply to take the critic at his or her word but in order to develop your own informed understanding and then create your own reading, enhanced by and building upon the readings of others. That is the logic of Norton Critical Editions—to provide you with a text that has stood the test of time and to offer a route through the myriad ways in which that text has been understood across the centuries and, in particular, over the last fifty or so years.

This Norton Critical Edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, then, not only presents a fresh text of the play itself—of, that is, the Second Quarto of the play, which is generally agreed to be the most authoritative early text—but also aims, by way of extracts from sources, critics, and scriptwriters, to tell a series of stories about the play, beginning with its origins and ending with its late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century adaptations, and encompassing the responses it has provoked from the seventeenth century to the present day in Britain, in the United States, and in other parts of the world. The critical story this Norton Critical Edition tells begins before the play even existed, with extracts from five underlying sources without which the play could not have come into being: Luigi Da Porto's