

Romeo & Juliet Act 1 Summary

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SCENE i

Sampson and Gregory, two servants of the house of Capulet, stroll through the streets of Verona. With bawdy banter, Sampson vents his hatred of the house of Montague. The two exchange punning remarks about physically conquering Montague men and sexually conquering Montague women. Gregory sees two Montague servants approaching, and discusses with Sampson the best way to provoke them into a fight without breaking the law. Sampson bites his thumb at the Montagues—a highly insulting gesture. A verbal confrontation quickly escalates into a fight. Benvolio, a kinsman to Montague, enters and draws his sword in an attempt to stop the confrontation. Tybalt, a kinsman to Capulet, sees Benvolio's drawn sword and draws his own. Benvolio explains that he is merely trying to keep the peace, but Tybalt professes a hatred for peace as strong as his hatred for Montagues, and attacks. The brawl spreads. A group of citizens bearing clubs attempts to restore the peace by beating down the combatants. Montague and Capulet enter, and only their wives prevent them from attacking one another. Prince Escalus arrives and commands the fighting stop on penalty of torture. The Capulets and Montagues throw down their weapons. The Prince declares the violence between the two families has gone on for too long, and proclaims a death sentence upon anyone who disturbs the civil peace again. He says that he will speak to Capulet and Montague more directly on this matter; Capulet exits with him, the brawlers disperse, and Benvolio is left alone with his uncle and aunt, Montague and Lady Montague.

Benvolio describes to Montague how the brawl started. Lady Montague asks whether Benvolio has seen her son, Romeo. Benvolio replies that he earlier saw Romeo pacing through a grove of sycamores outside the city; since Romeo seemed troubled, Benvolio did not speak to him. Concerned about their son, the Montagues tell Benvolio that Romeo has often been seen melancholy, walking alone among the sycamores. They add that they have tried to discover what troubles him, but have had no success. Benvolio sees Romeo approaching, and promises to find out the reason for his melancholy. The Montagues quickly depart.

Benvolio approaches his cousin. With a touch of sadness, Romeo tells Benvolio that he is in love with Rosaline, but that she does not return his feelings and has in fact sworn to live a life of chastity. Benvolio counsels Romeo to forget her by gazing on other beauties, but Romeo contends that the woman he loves is the most beautiful of all. Romeo departs, assuring Benvolio that he cannot teach him to forget his love. Benvolio resolves to do just that.

SCENE ii

On another street of Verona, Capulet walks with Paris, a noble kinsman of the Prince. The two discuss Paris's desire to marry Capulet's daughter, Juliet. Capulet is overjoyed, but also states that Juliet—not yet fourteen—is too young to get married. He asks Paris to wait two years. He assures Paris that he favors him as a suitor, and invites Paris to the traditional masquerade feast he is holding that very night so that Paris might begin to woo Juliet and win her heart. Capulet dispatches a servant, Peter, to invite a list of people to the feast. As Capulet and Paris walk away, Peter laments that he cannot read and will therefore have difficulty accomplishing his task.

Romeo and Benvolio happen by, still arguing about whether Romeo will be able to forget his love. Peter asks Romeo to read the list to him; Rosaline's name is one of those on the list. Before departing, Peter invites Romeo and Benvolio to the party—assuming, he says, that they are not Montagues. Benvolio tells Romeo that the feast will be the perfect opportunity to compare Rosaline with the other beautiful women of Verona. Romeo agrees to go with him, but only because Rosaline herself will be there.

SCENE iii

In Capulet's house, just before the feast is to begin, Lady Capulet calls to the Nurse, needing help to find her daughter. Juliet enters, and Lady Capulet dismisses the Nurse so that she might speak with her daughter alone. She immediately changes her mind, however, and asks the Nurse to remain and add her counsel. Before Lady Capulet can begin to speak, the Nurse launches into a long story about how, as a

child, an uncomprehending Juliet became an innocent accomplice to a sexual joke. Lady Capulet tries unsuccessfully to stop the wildly amused Nurse. An embarrassed Juliet forcefully commands that the Nurse stop.

Lady Capulet asks Juliet what she thinks about getting married. Juliet replies that she has not given it any thought. Lady Capulet observes that she gave birth to Juliet when she was almost Juliet's current age. She excitedly continues that Juliet must begin to think about marriage because the "valiant Paris" has expressed an interest in her (1.3.76). Juliet dutifully replies that she will look upon Paris at the feast to see if she might love him. A servingman enters to announce the beginning of the feast.

SCENE iv

Romeo, Benvolio, and their friend Mercutio, all wearing masks, have gathered with a group of mask-wearing guests on their way to the Capulets' feast. Still melancholy, Romeo wonders how they will get into the Capulets' feast, since they are Montagues. When that concern is brushed aside, he states that he will not dance at the feast. Mercutio begins to gently mock Romeo, transforming all of Romeo's statements about love into blatantly sexual metaphors. Romeo refuses to engage in this banter, explaining that in a dream he learned that going to the feast was a bad idea. Mercutio responds with a long speech about Queen Mab of the fairies, who visits people's dreams. The speech begins as a flight of fancy, but Mercutio becomes almost entranced by it, and a bitter, fervent strain creeps in. Romeo steps in to stop the speech and calm Mercutio down. Mercutio admits that he has been talking of nothing, noting that dreams are but "the children of an idle brain" (1.4.97).

Benvolio refocuses their attention on actually getting to the feast. Romeo voices one last concern: he has a feeling that the night's activities will set in motion the action of fate, resulting in untimely death. But, putting himself in the hands of "he who hath the steerage of my course," Romeo's spirits rise, and he continues with his friends toward the feast (1.4.112).

SCENE v

In the great hall of the Capulets, all is a-bustle. The servants work feverishly to make sure all runs smoothly, and set aside some food to make sure they have some enjoyment of the feast as well. Capulet makes his rounds through groups of guests, joking with them and encouraging all to dance.

From across the room, Romeo sees Juliet, and asks a servingman who she is. The servingman does not know. Romeo is transfixed; Rosaline vanishes from his mind and he declares that he has never been in love until this moment. Moving through the crowd, Tybalt hears and recognizes Romeo's voice. Realizing that there is a Montague present, Tybalt sends a servant to fetch his rapier. Capulet overhears Tybalt and reprimands him, telling him that Romeo is well regarded in Verona, and that he will not have the youth harmed at his feast. Tybalt protests, but Capulet scolds him until he agrees to keep the peace. As Capulet moves on, Tybalt vows that he will not let this indignity pass.

Meanwhile, Romeo has approached Juliet and touched her hand. In a dialogue laced with religious metaphors that figure Juliet as a saint and Romeo as a pilgrim who wishes to erase his sin, he tries to convince her to kiss him, since it is only through her kiss that he might be absolved. Juliet agrees to remain still as Romeo kisses her. Thus, in the terms of their conversation, she takes his sin from him. Juliet then makes the logical leap that if she has taken Romeo's sin from him, his sin must now reside in her lips, and so they must kiss again.

Just as their second kiss ends, the Nurse arrives and tells Juliet that her mother wants to speak with her. Romeo asks the Nurse who Juliet's mother is. The Nurse replies that Lady Capulet is her mother. Romeo is devastated. As the crowd begins to disperse, Benvolio shows up and leads Romeo from the feast. Juliet is just as struck with the mysterious man she has kissed as Romeo is with her. She comments to herself that if he is already married, she feels she will die (1.5.131). In order to find out Romeo's identity without raising any suspicions, she asks the Nurse to identify a series of young men. The Nurse goes off and returns with the news that the man's name is Romeo, and that he is a Montague. Overcome with anguish that she loves a Montague, Juliet follows her nurse from the hall.