

Romeo & Juliet Act 3 Summary

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SCENE i

As they walk in the street under the boiling sun, Benvolio suggests to Mercutio that they go indoors, fearing that a brawl will be unavoidable should they encounter Capulet men. Mercutio replies that Benvolio has as quick a temper as any man in Italy, and should not criticize others for their short fuses. Tybalt enters with a group of cronies. He approaches Benvolio and Mercutio and asks to speak with one of them. Annoyed, Mercutio begins to taunt and provoke him. Romeo enters. Tybalt turns his attention from Mercutio to Romeo, and calls Romeo a villain. Romeo, now secretly married to Juliet and thus Tybalt's kinsman, refuses to be angered by Tybalt's verbal attack. Tybalt commands Romeo to draw his sword. Romeo protests that he has good reason to love Tybalt, and does not wish to fight him. He asks that until Tybalt knows the reason for this love, he put aside his sword. Mercutio angrily draws his sword and declares with biting wit that if Romeo will not fight Tybalt, he will. Mercutio and Tybalt begin to fight. Romeo, attempting to restore peace, throws himself between the combatants. Tybalt stabs Mercutio under Romeo's arm, and as Mercutio falls, Tybalt and his men hurry away. Mercutio dies, cursing both the Montagues and the Capulets: "A plague o' both your houses" (3.1.87), and still pouring forth his wild witticisms: "Ask for me tomorrow, and / you shall find me a grave man" (3.1.93–94). Enraged, Romeo declares that his love for Juliet has made him effeminate, and that he should have fought Tybalt in Mercutio's place. When Tybalt, still angry, storms back onto the scene, Romeo draws his sword. They fight, and Romeo kills Tybalt. Benvolio urges Romeo to run; a group of citizens outraged at the recurring street fights is approaching. Romeo, shocked at what has happened, cries "O, I am fortune's fool!" and flees (3.1.131).

The Prince enters, accompanied by many citizens, and the Montagues and Capulets. Benvolio tells the Prince the story of the brawl, emphasizing Romeo's attempt to keep the peace, but Lady Capulet, Tybalt's aunt, cries that Benvolio is lying to protect the Montagues. She demands Romeo's life. Prince Escalus chooses instead to exile Romeo from Verona. He declares that should Romeo be found within the city, he will be killed.

SCENE ii

In Capulet's house, Juliet longs for night to fall so that Romeo will come to her "untalked of and unseen" (3.2.7). Suddenly the Nurse rushes in with news of the fight between Romeo and Tybalt. But the Nurse is so distraught, she stumbles over the words, making it sound as if Romeo is dead. Juliet assumes Romeo has killed himself, and she resigns to die herself. The Nurse then begins to moan about Tybalt's death, and Juliet briefly fears that both Romeo and Tybalt are dead. When the story is at last straight and Juliet understands that Romeo has killed Tybalt and been sentenced to exile, she curses nature that it should put "the spirit of a fiend" in Romeo's "sweet flesh" (3.2.81–82). The Nurse echoes Juliet and curses Romeo's name, but Juliet denounces her for criticizing her husband, and adds that she regrets faulting him herself. Juliet claims that Romeo's banishment is worse than ten thousand slain Tybalts. She laments that she will die without a wedding night, a maiden-widow. The Nurse assures her, however, that she knows where Romeo is hiding, and will see to it that Romeo comes to her for their wedding night. Juliet gives the Nurse a ring to give to Romeo as a token of her love.

SCENE iii

In Friar Lawrence's cell, Romeo is overcome with grief, and wonders what sentence the Prince has decreed. Friar Lawrence tells him he is lucky: the Prince has only banished him. Romeo claims that banishment is a penalty far worse than death, since he will have to live, but without Juliet. The friar tries to counsel Romeo but the youth is so unhappy that he will have none of it. Romeo falls to the floor. The Nurse arrives, and Romeo desperately asks her for news of Juliet. He assumes that Juliet now thinks of him as a murderer and threatens to stab himself. Friar Lawrence stops him and scolds him for being unmanly. He explains that Romeo has much to be grateful for: he and Juliet are both alive,

and after matters have calmed down, Prince Escalus might change his mind. The friar sets forth a plan: Romeo will visit Juliet that night, but make sure to leave her chamber, and Verona, before the morning. He will then reside in Mantua until news of their marriage can be spread. The Nurse hands Romeo the ring from Juliet, and this physical symbol of their love revives his spirits. The Nurse departs, and Romeo bids Friar Lawrence farewell. He must prepare to visit Juliet and then flee to Mantua.

SCENE iv

Capulet, Lady Capulet, and Paris walk together. Capulet says that because of the terrible recent events, he has had no time to ask his daughter about her feelings for Paris. Lady Capulet states that she will know her daughter's thoughts by the morning. Paris is about to leave when Capulet calls him back and makes what he calls "a desperate tender of my child's love" (3.4.12–13). Capulet says he thinks his daughter will listen to him, then corrects himself and states that he is sure Juliet will abide by his decision. He promises Paris that the wedding will be held on Wednesday, then stops suddenly and asks what day it is. Paris responds that it is Monday; Capulet decides that Wednesday is too soon, and that the wedding should instead be held on Thursday.

SCENE v

Just before dawn, Romeo prepares to lower himself from Juliet's window to begin his exile. Juliet tries to convince Romeo that the birdcalls they hear are from the nightingale, a night bird, rather than from the lark, a morning bird. Romeo cannot entertain her claims; he must leave before the morning comes or be put to death. Juliet declares that the light outside comes not from the sun, but from some meteor. Overcome by love, Romeo responds that he will stay with Juliet, and that he does not care whether the Prince's men kill him. Faced with this turnaround, Juliet declares that the bird they heard was the lark; that it is dawn and he must flee. The Nurse enters to warn Juliet that Lady Capulet is approaching. Romeo and Juliet tearfully part. Romeo climbs out the window. Standing in the orchard below her window, Romeo promises Juliet that they will see one another again, but Juliet responds that he appears pale, as one dead in the bottom of a tomb. Romeo answers that, to him, she appears the same way, and that it is only sorrow that makes them both look pale. Romeo hurries away as Juliet pulls in the ladder and begs fate to bring him back to her quickly.

Lady Capulet calls to her daughter. Juliet wonders why her mother would come to speak to her so early in the morning. Unaware that her daughter is married to Romeo, Lady Capulet enters the room and mistakes Juliet's tears as continued grief for Tybalt. Lady Capulet tells Juliet of her deep desire to see "the villain Romeo" dead (3.5.80). In a complicated bit of punning every bit as impressive as the sexual punning of Mercutio and Romeo, Juliet leads her mother to believe that she also wishes Romeo's death, when in fact she is firmly stating her love for him. Lady Capulet tells Juliet about Capulet's plan for her to marry Paris on Thursday, explaining that he wishes to make her happy. Juliet is appalled. She rejects the match, saying "I will not marry yet; and when I do, I swear / It shall be Romeo—whom you know I hate— / Rather than Paris" (3.5.121–123). Capulet enters the chamber. When he learns of Juliet's determination to defy him he becomes enraged and threatens to disown Juliet if she refuses to obey him. When Juliet entreats her mother to intercede, her mother denies her help.

After Capulet and Lady Capulet storm away, Juliet asks her nurse how she might escape her predicament. The Nurse advises her to go through with the marriage to Paris—he is a better match, she says, and Romeo is as good as dead anyhow. Though disgusted by her nurse's disloyalty, Juliet pretends to agree, and tells her nurse that she is going to make confession at Friar Lawrence's. Juliet hurries to the friar, vowing that she will never again trust the Nurse's counsel. If the friar is unable to help her, Juliet comments to herself, she still has the power to take her own life.