

Romeo and Juliet

A handful of Shakespeare's plays begin with expository prologues. We're in ancient Troy amid the war of 'ravished Helen' (Prologue 9), says the Prologue to *Troilus and Cressida*; did you see Part 1 and can you remember where we left things? asks the Prologue to *2 Henry IV*; bear with us as we try to depict grand battles within the limits of the stage, says the Prologue to *Henry V*; welcome to olde-worlde storyland, says the Prologue to *Pericles*. Only in *Romeo and Juliet* does the Prologue summarize the entire play, deaths and all. Because of *Romeo and Juliet's* extraordinary cultural reach, we all already know something about the play before we read it. But even if we don't, or even if back in 1595 we didn't, we soon will. 'Two households', 'Verona', 'ancient grudge', 'star-crossed lovers', 'take their life', 'two-hours' traffic of our stage' (Prologue 1, 2, 3, 6, 12). Yada yada yada. Two minutes in, and there's nothing to play for.

Romeo and Juliet is distinctive in making so immediately explicit what's coming.

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-crossed lovers take their life,
 Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
 Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.
 The fearful passage of their death-marked love
 And the continuance of their parents' rage –
 Which but their children's end, naught 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.

(Prologue 1–14)

In the language of film reviews, this needs a spoiler alert; in the language of narrative theory, it is an extended prolepsis, or flash-forward. The play is thus strongly teleological, heading inexorably to a conclusion that is already written. The lovers are dead, in terms of our experience of the play, before we even meet them. They are introduced to us only to flesh out a fatalistic plot. Not only does the Chorus tell us the plot outline in a sonnet form – characterized by a fourteen-line structure and predictable rhyme scheme, heading relentlessly towards its closing couplet – it is also full of the language of determinism: the ‘fatal loins’ of the families has the idea of ‘fated’ as well as ‘fatal’ meaning deadly; the lovers are ‘star-crossed’, so astrologically fated; they are ‘misadventured’, meaning unlucky. Their love is always already ‘death-marked’, before it even begins at the Capulet’s party. The language, therefore, and the worldview of the Prologue stress the inevitability, the pre-scriptedness, the

already-happenedness of the events that are still to unfold in the playhouse. It's a clever trick of the director Baz Luhrmann, in introducing his 1996 film, to have the Prologue delivered by a newscaster: the bland, almost formulaic structure of Shakespeare's verse here fits the reported, after-the-fact, too-late-to-be-different indifference of broadcast news. And the sonnet's rhythmical structure also serves the same purpose. Those alternate end rhymes also produce inevitability in microcosm: once the pattern has been established, we are simply waiting for the completing rhyme. Each positive or relatively neutral term turns bad or is negated by its rhyming completion: dignity becomes mutiny; scene becomes unclean; foes, overthrows; life, strife; love, remove. Both the formal structure and the fatalistic language underline the proleptic or spoiler-like character of the opening Prologue. And this anticipatory quality is itself an anticipation of later elements in the play which turn on premonition or a doomed future, such as Romeo's anxiety: 'I fear too early, for my mind misgives/Some consequence yet hanging in the stars/Shall bitterly begin' (1.4.106-8).

What, then, is the purpose and effect of so completely pre-empting the play's outcome in its opening lines? First, it's worth recalling that early modern audiences and readers were less interested in shock endings or surprise fictions than we are – or think we are. Ideas of originality have a high status in twenty-first-century ideas of art, but that's not the case for the sixteenth century. A humanist education system suspicious of novelty, sometimes judging invention or fiction as morally compromised because untrue, taught generations of playwrights and poets that translating, reworking

and rewriting existing texts was the sign of the artist. For readers and audiences, this intellectual method known as *imitatio* also offered the particular in-crowd pleasure of spotting those sources and appreciating the craft and invention worked on them. When the law student John Manningham saw *Twelfth Night* at Middle Temple in 1602, for example, he noted its similarity to *The Comedy of Errors* and to Plautus' *Menaechmi*: not by way of complaint about a tired or hackneyed plot, but rather with the enjoyment of narrative familiarity and pride at his own ability to recognize precedents. Long narratives in the period often had intermediate plot summaries – short precis verses precede the long cantos of Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590), for instance. Such examples suggest that the pleasure of reading was not in the surprise and fulfilment of seeing how things turned out in an uncertain plot, but rather in enjoying the variations on an established theme.

Perhaps we are not in fact so far from this in the modern world: watch any movie trailer and it's pretty self-evident what's going to happen. I'm a particular fan of those internet lists of movie clichés which reveal how much of our mass entertainment is enjoyable precisely because it operates within existing narrative paradigms. You may know the sort of thing. If the movie hero has a sidekick who mentions his family in the first two minutes of the film, the sidekick will surely be killed, especially if he has a photo of them on his desk, and even more especially if that includes a dog, which will also be killed. Our hero will fight one man in the gang at a time while the others dance around menacingly with their

fists up, will show no pain even during the most terrific beating, yet will wince prettily when a woman attempts to clean a wound just over his right eyebrow, etc. etc. So *Romeo and Juliet* operates within a cultural world in which originality and surprise are not high entertainment values, but we might wonder whether ours is any different.

A second point about spoilers is more specifically generic. Can tragedy even have a spoiler? If we know the play is called 'The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet', are we really ever in any doubt about how things will turn out? Some evidence suggests that Renaissance tragedies were performed on a stage draped with black, which would have the same giveaway quality. The French playwright Jean Anouilh, who wrote a version of the Greek tragedy *Antigone* in the mid-twentieth century, introduced into his play a description of the nature of tragedy that has no precedent in Sophocles' original. Anouilh's Chorus argues that tragedy is 'restful' because there is 'no need to do anything. It does itself. Like clockwork set going since the beginning of time.' I am always rapt by watching those unfurling patterns of dominoes set off by a single tap: like these, Anouilh suggests, tragedy just needs the 'flick of a finger'. One related observation that's commonly made about tragedy is that human agency is reduced so as to be non-existent. The critic Susan Snyder had a great take on this, arguing that Shakespeare's tragic world is governed by the inevitability of the conflict between human and cosmic law, the contradictions inherent in the individual or his or her circumstances. There's no turning back, no alternative. Against this inevitability, Snyder offers the useful contrasting principle of 'evitability' as the governing condition of Shakespearean

comedy, which rewards opportunism and pragmatism as it twists and turns to avoid obstacles and come to its redemptive or procreative conclusion. Inexorability, therefore, that already-known-ness that is such a significant function of *Romeo and Juliet's* Prologue, is the hallmark of tragedy itself.

So is tragedy the genre in which the human's capacity to affect his or her situation is most undermined? Questions of agency in tragedy are discussed in more detail in the chapter on *Macbeth*. Maybe the popularity of tragedy as an early modern form reflects this cultural interest. At the time of Shakespeare's writing, philosophies of causation were on the move. They began to shift away from the providential, theocentric views of medieval Christianity – broadly, things happen because God says so – via Machiavelli's unsentimental stress on human ingenuity and significance in *The Prince* (circulated widely in the second half of the sixteenth century), and emerged somewhere about the philosopher Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (printed in 1651), where things happen because humans, individually and collectively, behave in particular self-interested ways. The fatalistic worldview of the *Romeo and Juliet* Prologue may have its own agenda: blaming some cosmic agency also lets humans off the hook, so that the death of the young lovers is less the fault of their pointlessly feuding elders and more some unavoidable and predestined tragedy. The Prince's announcement at the end of the play that 'Some shall be pardoned, and some punished' (5.3.307), suggests a judgement that can target responsible human agents. To put it another way, the play moves away from those mysteriously fatal loins and misadventured piteous overthrows to a more explicitly temporal and judicial explanatory framework. But, if it was

all always going to be like this, it feels a bit harsh to pin the blame on any particular – and probably minor – character for making it happen. In a story of star-crossed lovers, is it really the apothecary who is at fault for selling Romeo the poison? Isn't he just a cosmic plot device, the emaciated cat's paw of fate?

So *Romeo and Juliet* has already happened, is already written, in some metaphysical sense, because that's the genre of tragedy. And in a more local sense, it's already written because, like pretty much every play he wrote, here the story pre-exists Shakespeare's retelling. There are stories of doomed lovers on opposite sides of some human divide in cultures across the world, and long before the English Renaissance, but the direct source Shakespeare used for *Romeo and Juliet* was a long narrative poem by Arthur Brooke, translated from the Italian under the title of *The tragicall history of Romeus and Juliet*, and first published in 1562. Brooke's poem also starts with a sonnet: perhaps that gave Shakespeare the idea. The comparison of the two is revelatory. Here's Brooke:

Love hath inflaméd twain by sudden sight,
 And both do grant the thing that both desire
 They wed in shrift by counsel of a friar.
 Young Romeus climbs fair Juliet's bower by night.
 Three months he doth enjoy his chief delight.
 By Tybalt's rage provokéd unto ire,
 He payeth death to Tybalt for his hire.
 A banished man he 'scapes by secret flight.
 New marriage is offered to his wife.
 She drinks a drink that seems to reave her breath:

They bury her that sleeping yet hath life.
 Her husband hears the tidings of her death.
 He drinks his bane. And she with Romeus' knife,
 When she awakes, herself, alas! she slay'th.

Brooke is absolutely clear that the blame for this is on the couple themselves. There's a moment of seeming to personify the agency of 'Love', but the human decision is clear: 'both do grant the thing that both desire'. Their lustful behaviour leads to their downfall. There's none of that fated or star-crossed language of Shakespeare, and even Brooke's particular version of the sonnet, the kind without a rhyming final couplet, has a less inexorable sense of form than that of his imitator. So Shakespeare changes the motivation or causation for the tragedy quite distinctly. Brooke's prefatory material is all moralistic, and in particular, anti-Catholic. His take-away message is that young people should do what their parents say, or terrible consequences will ensue, and especially they should avoid gossipy old women and dodgy friars (Brooke's poem as a whole is a bit more sympathetic to the lovers than this framework suggests, but it starts in very didactic mode). We can see that Shakespeare – as often – jettisons this moralistic notion. No one reading *Romeo and Juliet* could really generate from it the moral that children should obey their parents, since those parents have forfeited moral authority because of their unexplained and therefore unjustified family feud, and so are not presented as sources of moral authority.

On the other hand, it's interesting to see that Shakespeare can change the framework for the tragedy, but he cannot

transform it so completely that the lovers can escape their families and live happily ever after in Mantua. The tragedy retains its inexorable shape. The fatal law governing events here is not just one of genre in general, but of the source in particular. The standard line on how Shakespeare uses his sources is that he transforms them from prosaic dross into poetic gold (tweaking ‘Romeus’ to ‘Romeo’ – genius?). That may well be true, but it’s also the case that he is rarely able to reshape them significantly. The source for Shakespeare seems to trace out a narrative arc that is irresistible. (*King Lear* is an important exception here, as we will see in the chapter on that play.) The play is thus overburdened and overdetermined by many preceding structures, including those of genre and of source. No wonder it needs to blurt out in the Chorus at the beginning the shape of what is to come. It starts to look as if this issue of hobbled or restricted agency is as much a feature of the playwright as the characters: like his Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare too is playing out a cosmically preordained script, with little of that contingent or playful evitability that Snyder identifies as the roadmap for comedy.

The relation between the Prologue and the play, then, turns out to be something rather like that between Brooke and Shakespeare: in each pair, the first is proleptic or anticipatory, but also pre-emptive, setting out the course the second must follow. The Renaissance theorist George Puttenham defined the rhetorical term for this: a ‘manner of disordered speech . . . we call it in English proverb, the cart before the horse, the Greeks call it *Hysteron proteron*’. The English version of this term, putting the cart before the horse, suggests haste – and there is indeed a kind of premature quality to

this play that is so shaped by youthful impatience and hurry, with its adolescent protagonists rushing towards their destiny, heedless of Friar Lawrence's caution: 'Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow' (2.5.15).

Lots of elements of this play are about coming too soon, and the sexual pun is somehow unavoidable: *Romeo and Juliet* is shaped as the structural equivalent of premature ejaculation. If, as many theorists have conjectured, the pleasure we take in narrative is somehow paced like sexual pleasure – enjoying anticipation, foreplay and climax – then this play needs to learn to take its time. Consummation – sexual, but also narrative – is too quick, wrongly placed: the couple exit with the friar to be married in 'short work' (2.5.35) at the end of Act 2. What should be the end of the play, if it were to end like a comedy – in marriage – is brought into the middle, and so there's nowhere good to go. It's a structural *hysteron proteron*, as those Greeks would have it: it puts the cart before the horse. We might compare this briefly to the contemporaneous play which shares many surprising aspects with *Romeo and Juliet*: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. At the beginning of the comedy, Duke Theseus is impatient to be married. The whole play operates as a kind of pretext or a time-filler, so that the time until his marriage to Hippolyta and its nocturnal consummation can pass by more quickly. At the end of the play, the fairies bless the marriage bed, bride and groom leave the stage, and marital sex happens, presumably, outside the frame of the play.

By contrast, *Romeo and Juliet* is a play that can't wait and has no truck with delayed gratification. The Chorus already spills out the story even before we've settled into our seats, and we learn in the first act that Juliet is not yet fourteen

years old. Her father initially tells Paris to wait: ‘Let two more summers wither in their pride / Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride’ (1.2.10–11). Then he relents: the marriage starts to be a matter of days rather than years away. What day is it? Juliet’s father asks Paris. Monday, is the reply. ‘Well, Wednesday is too soon’ (3.4.19), says Capulet, before setting the marriage day for Thursday. Paris wishes ‘Thursday were tomorrow’ (29); Capulet’s question ‘Do you like this haste?’ (3.4.22) seems merely rhetorical.

Juliet cannot wait for Romeo to arrive:

Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
Towards Phoebus’ lodging. Such a waggoner
As Phaëton would whip you to the west
And bring in cloudy night immediately.

(3.2.1–4)

Her rhythms here are impatient, breathless – the opening word ‘Gallop’ deploys an initial stressed syllable (like Richard III’s opening speech, this is technically called trochaic rather than iambic), so that even the language is in too much of a hurry for all that leisurely de-dum de-dum business. And Juliet’s own imagery for her impatience understands that it is not just that she is too eager for Romeo’s arrival, but that she is too eager for this adult experience:

So tedious is this day
As is the night before some festival
To an impatient child that hath new robes
And may not wear them.

(3.2.28–31)

Her simile is from childhood experience, and it movingly captures the gap between the present and the hurried future to which she is committing herself.

We used to assume that Shakespeare intended this play to represent a high romantic love because early teenage was a normal time for Elizabethans to be married – an assumption based on some evidence of very young betrothals in noble families, where children were affianced to perpetuate long-term dynastic alliances. But the average age for marriage was probably only slighter lower at the end of the sixteenth century than it is now in Western countries – around the mid-twenties. It's therefore clear that everyone who was watching the play would have thought that Juliet was too young for this, and although we don't know Romeo's age, there's no particular sense of an age gap, so it is likely he was also seen as too immature for marriage. The fact that Juliet's age is so emphasized by the Nurse, in a comic monologue fixing her age to the memory of 'Tis since the earthquake now eleven years, / And she was weaned' (1.3.25–6), means that we are supposed to notice it. Only a tiny handful of Shakespearean characters are identified by precise age. To put the point another way, no actor of the actual age of Juliet could now perform this role professionally, as the producers of Baz Luhrmann's iconic film version of the play from 1996 found, when they initially cast the fourteen-year-old Natalie Portman in the title role but realized she was required to act in ways technically illegal because of her age. Leonardo DiCaprio (then aged twenty-two) was cast as a Romeo who is likeably gawky and clumsy, a big, overgrown and uncoordinated teenager. It's a clever cinematic attempt to humanize a character who

can seem a bit two-dimensional, but it's also a way to humanize a helter-skelter plot that is too quick and needs to slow down. As Friar Lawrence says, sagely: 'Wisely and slow. They stumble that run fast' (2.2.94). Unfortunately, the friar is so beguiled by the anticipated honour of uniting the feuding families that in his other hand he brandishes the tragedy's starting pistol. Puttenham's inversion, that *hysteron proteron*, is here developmental as well as rhetorical and structural. The Chorus's spoiler serves as a metonym – a rhetorical term for a part substituting for the whole – for a play which is always ahead of itself, precocious, impatient, too much too soon. Even that 'two-hours' traffic of our stage' sets the clock ticking – it's hard to think the play could ever have been over so fast, but somehow it adds to its hectic quality.

So far I've suggested that the play was always already tragic. But there's an alternative reading. Perhaps that tumbling hectic pace overshoots comedy and brings *Romeo and Juliet* to its tragic conclusion. The play misses a comic redemption by a matter of minutes. It's entirely appropriate to the play's characteristic impatience that it ends with Romeo killing himself just that bit too quickly to realize that Juliet is not actually dead. Perhaps this is a play that becomes, rather than is, tragic. A Restoration adaptation performed it on alternate nights with a happy ending. Young people, programmed towards romantic love and sexual reproduction, really belong in a comedy. Disapproving parents also have a role as archetypal blocking figures in comedy, a genre that tends to see the young win out over their elders' blinkered prejudices. A *Midsummer Night's Dream's* Egeus, for instance, is another father dead set against his daughter's choice in marriage, but

his objections are simply overruled as the play comes to its multiply marital comic ending. In *Romeo and Juliet* it's often Mercutio's death – itself a consequence of Romeo's awkward and hasty intervention in the fight with Tybalt – that is seen as a generic tipping point, the moment at which the play stops being a comedy and turns to the sombre choreography of tragedy. The play leaves the busy and social world of the play's opening (Verona is the kind of Italian city in which Shakespeare sets his comedies), and the lovers must set aside their comic companions, the Nurse and Mercutio. The movement of the play is towards the lonely world of tragedy, which ends in the charnel-house claustrophobia of the Capulet tomb.

If, after all, this is a play that could have turned out differently – if only the friar's messenger had not been quarantined by the plague, if only Juliet had woken seconds earlier – then perhaps the presence of the Prologue does something different. If this is a tragedy morphing out of a comic matrix, as Susan Snyder would put it, perhaps the purpose of the Chorus is more pointedly pre-emptive. It might look as if this could all turn out well, but you've already heard that it won't. Don't get your hopes up. These comic-looking elements are actually all foreclosed in a tragic narrative. Even if the play itself looks evitable rather than inevitable, the Prologue makes clear that there's only one way it can end.

One last footnote to this story of tragic inevitability. Like others of Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet* exists in a couple of distinct early editions, with textual variations that speak to the life of the play on stage and in development. When it is printed in the First Folio, one other difference has

crept in. No Prologue. *Romeo and Juliet* in the Folio edition – the one that its editors bragged presented the ‘perfect’ copies – begins with the street fight between the Montague and Capulet servants, without any tragic or star-crossed framing. Without that pre-emptive, deterministic Prologue, without the opening *hysteron proteron*, without that perverse relaxation Anouilh attributed to tragic inevitability – it’s quite a different play.