ROMEO AND JULIET
BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

Romeo And Juliet is an early tragedy written between 1594 and 1596.

There is no proof that the story of Romeo And Juliet is in fact true however, in the thirteenth century there were certainly two feuding Italian families. The Montecchi of Verona and the Capelletti of Cremona were locked in political struggle. These two families are referred to in Dante’s Purgatorio, Canto VI. It is not known if they had children named Romeo and Juliet.

The story of two young star-crossed lovers was most popular in France and Italy, with tales about them existing hundreds of years before Shakespeare. It is known that Shakespeare based his play on a poem published two years before his birth. The poem was an English translation of the French translation of the original Italian.

The English translation was The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet (1562) by Arthur Brooke, a poem of 3020 lines in couplets and poulters with lines alternating between twelve and fourteen syllables. This was based on Boaistuau’s French translation of a novella in Italian by Bandello.

Dramatists in Shakespeare’s time were incredible bower-birds: borrowing and even outright stealing from other sources. Shakespeare stole plots, dialogue, character names and titles. But this was common practice: to Elizabethan playwrights, plots and characters were common property. There were no copyright laws at the time and a loose sense of intellectual property.

It’s very revealing to examine what Shakespeare kept and what he changed from his original sources. Shakespeare’s changes to the story are telling with regard to his values as a dramatist. He has many verbal parallels with Brooke, and has absorbed the atmosphere of an Italian summer with warm nights and sudden thunder storms. However, the original poem was framed as more of a warning to children who failed to obey their parents and it examined the consequences that would result from such behaviour. It is interesting to read Brooke’s address “To the reader” prefacing his work in order to appreciate Shakespeare’s less didactic approach. Brooke states:

“And to this end, good Reader, is this tragical 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; conferring their principal counsels with drunken gossips and superstitious friars (the naturally fit instruments of unchastity); attempting all adventures of peril for th’ attaining of their wished lust; using auricular confession the key of whoredom and treason, for furtherance of their purpose; abusing the honourable name of lawful marriage to cloak the shame of stolen contracts; finally by all means of unhonest life hasting to most unhappy death.”

Shakespeare managed to move beyond this, endowing the young lovers with independence and importance, revealing how adult fallacies can impact on their own children’s fate. As Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet draws to a close Juliet’s father Capulet, looking at the bodies of the two young lovers, states that they are “poor sacrifices to our enmity”. Shakespeare does not act as a moralist, judging youthful choices. He simply presents us with three-dimensional characters, living real lives and allows their humanity to unravel: as Harold Bloom states, ‘Shakespeare stands back from assigning blame’.

The plight of young lovers has always appealed to writers and audiences alike. Throughout history many young people have fallen in love against their parents’ wishes. Shakespeare’s version of this story has survived as one of the most loved and respected because he allows us to see the world through the young lover’s hearts and minds.
ARCHEOLOGICAL DISCOVERY

For over 400 years Romeo And Juliet has been recognised internationally as one of the most beautiful and tragic love stories of all time. Much excitement arose in 2007 when archaeologist Elena Menotti discovered Neolithic remains of two skeletons earthed in an embrace outside Mantua, only 40 kilometres south of Verona where this timeless story is set. “As far as we know, it’s unique,” Menotti said. “Double burials from the Neolithic are unheard of, and these are even hugging.” The pair of human skeletons locked in a tender embrace were found at a construction site near Verona in northern Italy.

Photo: Associated Press
The best known cinematic versions of *Romeo And Juliet* are those directed by Franco Zeffirelli in 1968 and by Baz Luhrmann in 1996. However, also available is the BBC Shakespeare version of 1978 and the 2013 version directed by Carlo Carlei, with a certain amount of script adaptation by Julian Fellowes.

The Broadway stage production from 2014 starring Condola Rashad and Orlando Bloom is available to watch in its entirety on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMFivz_05Jk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMFivz_05Jk)

This story has inspired all kinds of adaptations, variations, parodies and responses, as people for centuries have been so captivated by these characters and their tale of passion. Some of the most well-known include:

The ballet version by Prokofiev, which was a much-loved vehicle for the famous dancers Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev (right).

Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story*, a musical set in 1950s New York. The film version was made in 1961.

John Madden’s *Shakespeare In Love* (1998) which imagines a romantic story about the writing of the play.

The Canadian TV series *Slings & Arrows* includes the rehearsal of a production of *Romeo And Juliet* as its season 2 subplot: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIY4-_LeQtA&list=PL780750213949CF79](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIY4-_LeQtA&list=PL780750213949CF79)

Joe Calarco’s Shakespeare’s *R&J*, which was performed by Bell Shakespeare in 2001.

The recent Irish play *A Tender Thing* imagines Romeo and Juliet living into old age together.

*Gnomeo And Juliet* (2011), an animated children’s comic adaptation about garden gnomes.

*Warm Bodies* (2013), a love story between a zombie named R and a girl named Julie, with tongue-in-cheek allusions to the original play, and even a balcony scene.

Of course, there are also countless songs and artworks that make reference to the lovers.
West Side Story (1961)
Director: Robert Wise & Jerome Robbins
Mirisch Pictures

Shakespeare In Love (1998)
Director: John Madden
Universal Studios