KEY CHARACTER PROFILES: ROMEO AND JULIET

Romeo
Today Romeo is synonymous with love. In this classic play Romeo’s passion drives him to kill himself when he believes his love, Juliet, is dead. It is the overwhelming power of Romeo’s love that clouds his character, making him far more complex than his peers. His intensity of emotion is reflected in his extreme actions throughout the play. Love compels him to creep into the Capulet garden to see Juliet, anger compels him to fight and to kill, despair compels him to suicide.

Romeo is a lover of women and a lover of poetry. His love is by no means a simple or straightforward matter. At the beginning of the play, Romeo pines for Rosaline, ‘Out of her favour where I am in love’. (Act 1:1:159) He proclaims her beauty, ‘O, she is rich in beauty …’ (Act 1:1:206). He explains her lack of interest in him ‘She is too fair, too wise, wisely too fair/ To merit bliss by making me despair’. (Act 1:2:212-3) He then continues in his rant of love to proclaim the extremities of his emotion. Here on his first appearance pre-empting the later events of the play driven by his passion, ‘Do I live dead, that I live to tell it now.’ (Act 1:1:215)

Romeo’s love for Rosaline disappears the instant he sees Juliet. His love for Rosaline could be called puppy love having all the markings of an adolescent crush.

Romeo’s passion for poetry is reflected in his language in Act 1:1. Yet his manner of speech here could suggest his emotion is somewhat put on or artificial. When considering Shakespeare’s use of metaphor and imagery this language denotes Romeo’s all encompassing emotion. Perhaps initially he is a self-indulgent and inexperienced teenager but after first kissing Juliet, she tells him ‘you kiss by th’ book’, (Act 1:5:107). She finds his kissing adequate but lacking in experience. His love for Juliet develops beyond the crush felt for Rosaline. Juliet’s clarity of observation challenges Romeo beyond his superficial love to result in an intense passion. This is revealed through the development of his language later in the play.

Juliet
Before she meets Romeo Juliet is an obedient child. She is nearly fourteen and accepts that girls of her age marry, as did her mother. She says that she will try to love Paris when her mother tells Juliet she is to marry him. When her Nurse talks of sex in Act 1 Scene 3, Juliet is uncomfortable.

Unlike Romeo, Juliet has no friends of her own age. She is isolated and entrapped in the world of the Capulets.

In just the five days that she meets Romeo and then dies, Juliet is transformed from child to woman. Unlike the confused Helena in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Juliet is able to criticise Romeo’s actions and decisions whilst being profoundly in love with him. She keeps her wits about her and does not blindly follow Romeo after he kills Tybalt, but she does release herself from her Capulet entrapment when she tries to be reunited with Romeo in the tomb. Her suicide is not out of loss and weakness but out of intense love for Romeo. Ironically Juliet kills herself with a dagger whereas Romeo swallows poison.
Friar Lawrence* (In some scripts this may be spelt Laurence)

Friar Lawrence is the only religious figure in the play. He shows compassion in his willingness to assist the young lovers and in marrying them, yet this act is the most political manoeuvre in the play. His mystical knowledge in the sleeping potion plan is unusual for a religious figure and the reasons for this diversity in his character is unclear.

Friar Lawrence’s actions in fact bring about the final tragedy although he acts with well-meaning intention.

Mercutio

Mercutio is Romeo’s quick-witted friend. He first appears in witty conversation with Romeo in Act 1, Scene 4 where he mocks the lovelorn Romeo and recounts the tale of Queen Mab. His sharp wit and intelligence make him a memorable Shakespearean character. He jokes frequently but is by no means a light character. His role is to deflate the romantic love within the play. Whereas other characters die blaming fate Mercutio dies cursing the feuding families.

Tybalt

Juliet’s cousin. Tybalt is an old name given to a cat. Mercutio says, ‘Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk?’ (3:1:68) and ‘Good King of Cats! Nothing, but one of your nine lives’. (3:1:70). Whereas Benvolio tries to stop Sampson and Gregory fighting in Act 1, Scene 1, Tybalt is ready and willing to fight, ‘Turn thee, Benvolio, look upon thy death’. (1:1:58) He hates and his comment reflects the blind hate of the servants and gives the audience no insight into the origin of the Capulet-Montague feud, ‘What, drawn and talk of peace? I have the word,/ As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee’. (1:1:61-2) Benvolio describes him as ‘The fiery Tybalt with his sword prepared’, (1:1:100).

The Parents

We first see the parents of Romeo and Juliet in Act 1 Scene 1 when the brawl instigated by Samson’s and Gregory’s comments wakes the town. Capulet and Montague are angered and ready to fight. It is their wives’ words which do not blatantly fuel the ongoing feud.

Capulet

Juliet’s father. He has long been feuding with Montague (Romeo’s father) but there is no suggestion in Shakespeare’s script as to the grounds for the feud. Capulet commands respect as when he says to Tybalt, ‘It is my will, the which if thou respect’, (1:5:71) and has quite a temper. Which we glimpse in that same dialogue with Tybalt, ‘You must contrary me!’ (5:1:84) and ‘I’ll make you quiet, what!’ (1:5:87). He appears to truly love his daughter but believes he knows what is best for her as he insists on the marriage to Paris. At the end of the play he is remorseful and makes his peace with Montague, ‘O brother Montague, give me thy hand’. (5:3:296) We see more of the Capulet parents than the Montague parents during the course of the play. This reflects the independence of the young man of the time, Romeo and highlights the entrapment of Juliet.
Lady Capulet
Capulet’s wife and Juliet’s mother. She reveals that she married at a younger age than that at which she wants Juliet to marry Paris, ‘By my count,/ I was your mother much upon these years/ That you are now a maid’. (1:3:72-4). Lady Capulet leaves the mothering to the Nurse and tends to coax Juliet by social expectation and obligation.

Montague
Romeo’s father and head of the Montague household. After we first see him in Act 1 Scene 1 he is concerned for Romeo’s apparent depression, ‘Could we but learn from whence his sorrows grow./ We would as willingly give cure as know’. (1:1:145-146)

Lady Montague
Romeo’s mother and Montague’s wife. She is most obviously against her husband joining the brawl in the opening scene, ‘Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe’. (1:1:71) She dies of grief when Romeo is exiled and her death is reported in one line by Montague as he enters the tomb in the final scene, ‘… my wife is dead tonight;/Grief of my son’s exile hath stopped her breath’. (5:3:210-1).

Benvolio
He is Montague’s nephew and Romeo’s cousin. He is a thoughtful character who tries to defuse violent scenes in public places, ‘I drew to part them:’ (1:1:99). Mercutio accuse Benvolio of having a nasty temper when in private, throughout the play Benvolio’s chief role is to help Romeo get his mind off Rosaline, even after Romeo has fallen in love with Juliet.

Prince Escalus
As the Prince of Verona he holds the position of political power and is therefore concerned with maintaining the public peace at all costs. He appears in Act 1 Scene 1 where he proclaims, ‘Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace,’ (1:1:72) speaking against those who have begun the fight in the street. He is not seen again until the end of the play in Act 5, Scene 3 and he has the final word, ‘For never was a Story of more woe/ Than this of Juliet and her Romeo’. (5:3:310)

Paris
He is the man Capulet would like to marry Juliet. Paris is also a kinsman to the Prince. Paris becomes quite arrogant and presumptuous in his manner when Capulet has promised Juliet will marry him. He refers to Capulet as father, ‘My father Capulet will have it so’ (4:1:2) and greets Juliet, ‘… my lady and my wife!’ (4:1:18)

Friar John
He is the Franciscan friar who Friar Lawrence asks to take the message to Romeo in Mantua. Friar John is literally locked into a house when meeting with another Friar prior to heading off on the journey to Mantua. At the time in London if people were suspected to be sick with the plague they were quarantined and as the friars were in such a house they were literally locked in and not permitted to leave, ‘Sealed up the doors, and would not let us forth’, (5:2:11). As a result the message never reached Romeo and Friar John gives it back to Friar Lawrence, ‘I could not send it – here it is again-‘ (5:2:13)
Balthasar
He is Romeo’s dedicated servant. In Act 5, Scene 1 Balthasar brings Romeo the news of Juliet’s death, ‘Her body sleeps in Capel’s monument’. He does not know that Juliet faked her own death.

Sampson and Gregory
Two servants from the Capulet household, They provoke the fight at the beginning of the play.

Abram
He is Montague’s servant who fights with Sampson and Gregory in the opening scene of the play.

The Apothecary
He is the chemist or pharmacist in Mantua. He makes potions and poisons. He sells Romeo the death potion in Act 5 Scene 1, ‘Such mortal drugs I have, but Mantua’s law/ Is death to any he that utters them’. ‘My poverty, but not my will, consents’, says the Apothecary as he explains that had he been wealthier, he would have refused to sell poison to Romeo.

Peter
He is a servant of the Capulet household. He is referred to by other servants in Act 5 (5:4:128-166).

Rosaline
Romeo is infatuated with Rosaline at the beginning of the play. Rosaline never appears onstage. In Act 1 Scene 2 the servant asks Romeo to read the names on the invitations to the Capulet party that the servant (who cannot read) is delivering. Rosaline is one of the names and this gives Romeo motivation to ‘crash’ the party.

The Chorus
The Chorus is derived from the Chorus in Greek drama which functions as a narrator offering commentary on the play’s plot and themes. In this play the Chorus appears only in Act 1. The Act 1 and Act 2 Prologues and then does not appear again.