**HOW ROMEUS BECAME ROMEO
A comparison of Arthur Brooke's "Romeus and Juliet"
and Shakespeare's** [**Romeo and Juliet**](http://www.amrep.org/randj/) **by** [**Ryan McKittrick**](http://www.amrep.org/articles/4_3a/romeus.html#ryan)

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| http://www.amrep.org/images/randj/178.jpg | http://www.amrep.org/images/pixel.gif |
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| Above: title page of the first edition of Brooke's "Romeus and Juliet. Below: Spranger Barry as Romeo and Isabella Nossiter as Juliet from a 1753 engraving |
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When Shakespeare sat down to write [*Romeo and Juliet*](http://www.amrep.org/randj/) around 1596, he wasn't starting from scratch. While he was working, Shakespeare was looking at a copy of a wordy 3,020-line narrative poem by Arthur Brooke titled "The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet." First published in 1562, "Romeus and Juliet" was well-known in England by the 1590s, and there's no doubt that the playwright kept a copy by his side when he dramatized the story of Verona's ill-fated lovers. Shakespeare saw in Brooke's rambling poem the potential for a play teeming with passion and conflict; but turning Brooke's poetry into compelling drama required extraordinary transformation and invention. "Pedestrian," "prolix," "leaden," "inert," and "wearisome" are just a few of the words literary critics have used to describe Brooke's work. J.J. Munro, in his introduction to a 1908 edition of "Romeus and Juliet," offered this comparison of the source material and the play: "Brooke's story meanders on like a listless stream in a strange and impossible land; Shakspere's [sic] sweeps on like a broad and rushing river, singing and foaming, flashing in sunlight and darkening in cloud, carrying all things irresistibly to where it plunges over the precipice into a waste of waters below." ([1](http://www.amrep.org/articles/4_3a/romeus.html#ryan))

Brooke's version of the Romeo and Juliet story is taken from a French poem by Pierre Boaistuau (1559) that was based on an Italian story by Matteo Bandello (1554), which was itself inspired by Luigi da Porto's Giulietta e Romeo (circa 1530). Although Shakespeare also consulted William Painter's 1562 English translation of Boaistuau's poem titled "Rhomeo and Julietta" (and possibly some of the earlier Italian texts), Brooke's "Romeus and Juliet" was his direct and primary source.

A reading of Brooke's poem reveals Shakespeare's inventiveness and skill as a dramatist. Apart from a complete overhaul of the language and verse (Brooke wrote in hypnotic, longwinded poulter's measure ([2](http://www.amrep.org/articles/4_3a/romeus.html#ryan)) while Shakespeare scripted his play in flexible blank verse), Shakespeare made significant changes to the story's timeline and structure in order to enhance the dramatic momentum, give the lovers' plight a sense of urgency, and add suspense. Shakespeare's play gallops apace; Brooke's poem trots along at a slow and steady tempo.

From the moment Shakespeare's Chorus appears before the audience and introduces the "two hours' traffic of our stage," the play's internal clock starts ticking. Shakespeare compresses what takes at least nine months to unfold in Brooke's poem into four days (Sunday through Thursday morning), giving the central relationship a new intensity and putting added pressure on the entire sequence of events. In Brooke's poem, Romeo meets Juliet at Capulet's feast and then passes by Juliet's window "a weeke or two in vayne" before speaking to her at length. Shakespeare has his impulsive lovers meet, woo, and resolve to marry all in the same night. Less than a day after they first lay eyes on each other, Romeo and Juliet rush to Friar Lawrence's cell, where they are married in secret.

Brooke gives Romeus and Juliet time to enjoy their marital bliss. In Shakespeare's play, however, the lovers' time together starts running out almost as soon as it begins. Romeus and Juliet consummate their marriage months before Romeus kills Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, and is banished by the Prince. Romeo and Juliet get married just hours before Tybalt's death; and the passion of their first and only night together is intensified by the prelude of murder.

The same morning Romeo flees to Mantua, Juliet's father insists on an arranged marriage between his daughter and her aristocratic suitor, Paris, and later violently threatens to disown her if she doesn't marry by Thursday. In both the play and poem, Juliet receives a drug from Friar Lawrence that will create the illusion of death, and returns home to offer her still-livid father a false repentance. Only in the play, however, does Juliet's acquiescing to marry Paris inspire Capulet to reschedule the wedding. Shakespeare has Capulet move the nuptials up from Thursday to Wednesday, and then invents a scene in which the father-of-the-bride is seen ordering the servants around in the middle of the night, frantically preparing his house for the hasty wedding. By this point, the play is in the whitewater rapids of what J.J. Munro called Shakespeare's "broad and rushing river."

To emphasize the pressures of time, Shakespeare gives precise information about when scenes occur throughout the play. As G. Blakemore Evans has noted, [*Romeo and Juliet*](http://www.amrep.org/randj/) is "unusually full, perhaps more so than any other Shakespearean play, of words like time, day, night, today, tomorrow, years, hours, minutes and specific days of the week, giving us a sense of events moving steadily and inexorably in a tight temporal framework." ([3](http://www.amrep.org/articles/4_3a/romeus.html#ryan))

Shakespeare also completely rewrote and restructured the beginning of the story in order to foreground the conflict between the two households and reveal the whole social spectrum of Verona. Unlike "Romeus and Juliet," the play opens with a brawl. Servants quarrel in proletarian prose, upper-class members of both the Capulet and Montague families join in the fray speaking in blank verse, and finally Prince Escales enters to break up the row, speaking his first speech in rhyming verse.4 Shakespeare repeats the pattern of this first scene (an outbreak of violence followed by the entrance of aristocratic authority) two more times: in the middle of the play, when Tybalt and Mercutio are murdered; and in the last scene, when Romeo kills Paris and the young lovers kill themselves.

Shakespeare's revised beginning also introduces characters who play major roles later in the drama. Tybalt doesn't appear in Brooke's poem until his fight with Romeo. Shakespeare, however, introduces Tybalt as a feisty agitator in the first scene, and then further develops the character by including him at Capulet's feast, where he nearly explodes after spotting Romeo. By the time he enters in the third act of the play hunting down Romeo, Tybalt is already a known troublemaker, and his presence in the scene immediately creates tension. Shakespeare also came up with the idea of having Tybalt kill Mercutio and using that murder to motivate Romeo's attack on Tybalt.

In addition to opening the play with a fight, Shakespeare invented the second scene, in which Capulet invites to his feast Paris, Juliet's suitor whom Brooke doesn't introduce until after Tybalt's death; the third scene with the Nurse, whom we don't meet until the feast in the poem; and the fourth scene, in which Romeo, Mercutio, and Benvolio are preparing to go to the Capulets' in disguise. By the end of the first act, the audience has met almost all the major players and Shakespeare has introduced all the future lines of conflict in the play.

Shakespeare fleshes out most of the figures in Brooke's poem, but two characters in particular emerge in the play. In "Romeus and Juliet," Mercutio only appears momentarily as one of the guests at Capulet's feast. He stands out in the poem only because he sits next to Juliet and because he has frigid hands. (It may be this brief appearance, however, that inspired Shakespeare to change Romeus to back to Romeo. Brooke uses Romeo to rhyme with Mercutio in one couplet when he's describing the feast.)

The leap from Brooke's shred of a character to Shakespeare's Mercutio is monumental. Mercutio's Queen Mab speech, his teasing of Romeo after Capulet's feast, his lewd interaction with the Nurse, and his death under Romeo's arm are all Shakespeare's inventions. Mercutio serves as a foil to Romeo; and his bawdiness, his tireless punning, and his insatiable wit ignite conflict throughout the first half of the play. John Dryden reported that Shakespeare once said he had to kill off Mercutio before Mercutio killed him. Dryden would have liked to see Mercutio live, but Tybalt's slaying of Mercutio is pivotal in the structure of the play. Mercutio's death pushes Romeo to murder Tybalt, catapulting the action forward and generating momentum and a sense of urgency for the rest of the drama.

Paris also stands out as a more fully developed character in the play. Introduced by Shakespeare early in the first act and then seen as a silent guest at Capulet's feast, Paris reenters in the play where he first appears in Brooke - after Tybalt's death, when Capulet decides it's time for his daughter to marry. Juliet's icy interaction with Paris at Lawrence's cell, where she's gone to beg the Friar to help her escape a second marriage, is Shakespeare's creation. So, too, is Paris' reappearance at the end of the play and his death at Romeo's hands in the tomb. His murder, combined with the killings of Mercutio and Tybalt, the suicides of Romeo and Juliet, and the offstage death of Lady Montague (also Shakespeare's invention), adds one more body to the play's carnage and expands the scope of the devastation and violence caused by the feuding.

Arthur Brooke didn't live to see the play his poem inspired. He drowned at sea one year after publishing "Romeus and Juliet." Because little is known about him, it's difficult to pin down Brooke's attitude towards Romeus and Juliet. In his preface to the poem, Brooke condemns his "unfortunate lovers" for "thrilling themselves to unhonest desire, neglecting the authority and advice of parents and friends; conferring their principal counsels with drunken gossips and suspersittious 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; [and] abusing the honourable name of lawful marriage to cloak the shame of stolen contracts." But the poem itself is more sympathetic towards Romeus, Juliet and even Catholic Friar Lawrence, and the preface may have been Brooke's attempt to ward off the moral condemnation of Protestant zealots. Perhaps Shakespeare saw through those introductory remarks. For what he found in Brooke's more than three thousand lines of rhyming couplets drove him to write a swift, explosive drama that immortalized the lovers' desire. In comparison to the play, Brooke's poem may seem dull and sluggish, but we are indebted to him for inspiring one of the most passionate plays about old hate and young love.

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| 1. Brooke, Arthur. *Romeus and Juliet, Being the Original of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, Newly Edited by J.J. Munro (New York: Duffield and Company, 1908) 59. | 2. Poulter's measure: a six-stress line followed by a seven-stress line with rhymed couplets. | 3. Evans, G. Blakemore, ed. Romeo and Juliet. (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003) 10. | 4. Kermode, Frank. Shakespeare’s Language (Farrar, Straus, Giroux: New York, 2000) 53.  |
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Source:

<http://www.amrep.org/articles/4_3a/romeus.html>