

ROMEO AND JULIET | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! *Go at your own pace, and have fun!*



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM



It's the first half of *Romeo and Juliet*, and everything is going swimmingly. Two teenagers from feuding families have been secretly in love for like twelve hours, the two adults they trust (Friar Laurence and Nurse) are egging them on because all of this is totally reasonable, and clearly everything is gonna turn out great because it's not like the Prince recently threatened execution if these families keep on fighting in the street (which seems to be kind of a pastime for them. Like baseball. Or underwater basketweaving.) What could possibly go wrong?

The Shakespeare

Enter JULIET.

JULIET

The clock struck nine when I did send the Nurse: In half an hour she promised to return. Perchance she cannot meet him. That's not so. O, she is lame! Love's heralds should be thoughts, Which ten times faster glides than the sun's beams, Driving back shadows over louring hills. Therefore do nimble-pinioned doves draw love, And therefore hath the wind-swift Cupid wings. Now is the sun upon the highmost hill Of this day's journey, and from nine till twelve Is three long hours, yet she is not come. Had she affections and warm youthful blood, She would be as swift in motion as a ball; My words would bandy her to my sweet love, And his to me. But old folks, many feign as they were dead, Unwieldy, slow, heavy and pale as lead.

Enter NURSE and PETER.

JULIET

O God, she comes. O honey Nurse, what news? Hast thou met with him? Send thy man away.

NURSE

Peter, stay at the gate.

Exit Peter.

JULIET

Now, good sweet Nurse—O Lord, why lookest thou sad? Though news be sad, yet tell them merrily. If good, thou shalt amend the music of sweet news By playing it to me with so sour a face.

Shakespeare used contractions to keep the verse flowing. Just like in "can't" and "cannot," the pronunciation of the first sound doesn't change—you just leave out part of the second word.

I'st = is it
I'faith = in faith
'th' other = on the other

Also: these words rhyme!

"Fie" and "hie" = "bye"
"Trow" = "know"
"Dost" = "dust"
"wanton" = "wan-tun"

The Translation

JULIET enters.

JULIET

I sent the Nurse at nine o'clock. Maybe she can't find him. That can't be. Oh, she's slow! Love's messengers should be thoughts, which fly ten times faster than sunbeams. They should be strong enough to push shadows over the dark hills. That's the way doves carry Venus so fast, and that's why Cupid has wings that let him fly as fast as the wind. Now it's noon. That's three hours since nine o'clock, but she hasn't come back. If she was young and passionate, she'd move as fast as a ball. My words would bounce her to my sweet love, and his words would bounce her back to me. But a lot of old people act like they're already dead—sluggish, slow, fat, and colorless, like lead.

The NURSE and PETER enter.

JULIET

Oh my God, here she comes! Oh sweet Nurse, what news do you bring? Have you spoken to him? Send your servingman away.

NURSE

Peter, wait for me at the gate.

PETER exits.

JULIET

Now, good sweet Nurse—Oh Lord, why do you look so sad? Even if the news is sad, tell me with a smile on your face. If the news is good, you're ruining the sweet news by playing a trick with a sour face like that.

NURSE

I am aweary, give me leave awhile. Fie, how my bones ache. What a jaunt have I!

JULIET

I would thou hadst my bones and I thy news. Nay, come, I pray thee, speak, good, good Nurse, speak.

NURSE

Jesu, what haste! Can you not stay a while? Do you not see that I am out of breath?

JULIET

How art thou out of breath when thou hast breath To say to me that thou art out of breath? The excuse that thou dost make in this delay Is longer than the tale thou dost excuse. Is thy news good or bad? Answer to that. Say either, and I'll stay the circumstance. Let me be satisfied, is't good or bad?

NURSE*

Well, you have made a simple choice. You know not how to choose a man. Romeo? No, not he. Though his face be better than any man's, yet his leg excels all men's; and for a hand and a foot and a body, though they be not to be talked on, yet they are past compare. He is not the flower of courtesy, but I'll warrant him as gentle as a lamb. Go thy ways, wench, serve God. What, have you dined at home?

JULIET

No, no. But all this did I know before. What says he of our marriage, what of that?

NURSE

Lord, how my head aches! What a head have I! It beats as it would fall in twenty pieces. My back o' th' other side—ah, my back, my back! Beshrew your heart for sending me about To catch my death with jauncing up and down.

NURSE

I am tired. Leave me alone for a minute. Oh my, my bones ache so much. I've been running all over the place.

JULIET

I wish you had my bones, and I had your news. Come on now, I beg you, speak, good Nurse, speak.

NURSE

Sweet Jesus, you're in such a hurry! Can't you wait for a moment? Don't you see that I'm out of breath?

JULIET

How can you be out of breath when you have enough breath to tell me that you're out of breath? The excuse you make to delay the news is longer than the news itself. Is the news good or bad? Answer that question. Tell me if it's good or bad, and I'll wait for the details. Tell me so I can be satisfied. Is it good or bad?

NURSE

Well, you have made a foolish choice. You don't know how to pick a man. Romeo? No, not him, though his face is more handsome than any man's, and his legs are prettier, and as for his hands and feet and body, they're not much to speak of, and yet they're beyond compare. He's not the most polite man in the world, but, believe me, he's gentle as a lamb. Well, do what you want. Be good. Have you had lunch yet?

JULIET

No, I haven't had lunch. Everything you told me I already knew. What does he say about our marriage? What about that?

NURSE

Lord, what a headache I've got! My head is pounding. It feels like it'll break into twenty pieces. My back aches too—Ooh, on the other side—ah, my poor aching back! Curse your heart for sending me running all over town. I could get sick and die.

JULIET

I'faith, I am sorry that thou art not well. Sweet, sweet, sweet Nurse, tell me, what says my love?

NURSE

Your love says, like an honest gentleman, And a courteous, and a kind, and a handsome, And, I warrant, a virtuous—Where is your mother?

JULIET

Where is my mother! Why, she is within. Where should she be? How oddly thou repliest, "Your love says, like an honest gentleman," "Where is your mother!"

NURSE

O God's Lady, dear, Are you so hot? Marry come up, I trow. Is this the poultice for my aching bones? Henceforward do your messages yourself.

JULIET

Here's such a coil! Come, what says Romeo?

NURSE

Have you got leave to go to shrift today?

JULIET

I have.

NURSE

Then hie you hence to Friar Laurence' cell; There stays a husband to make you a wife. Now comes the wanton blood up in your cheeks; They'll be in scarlet straight at any news. Hie you to church; I must another way. To fetch a ladder by the which your love Must climb a bird's nest soon when it is dark. Go, I'll to dinner. Hie you to the cell.

JULIET

Hie to high fortune! Honest Nurse, farewell. *Exeunt.*

JULIET

Believe me, I'm sorry you're in pain. Sweet, sweet, sweet Nurse, tell me, what did my love Romeo say?

NURSE

Your love says, like an honorable gentleman, who is courteous, kind, handsome, and, I believe, virtuous—where is your mother?

JULIET

Where is my mother? Why, she's inside. Where else would she be? Your answer is so strange! "Your love says, like an honorable gentleman, "Where is your mother?"

NURSE

Oh holy Mary, mother of God! Are you this impatient? Come on, you're being ridiculous! Is this the cure for my aching bones? From now on, take care of your messages yourself.

JULIET

You're making such a fuss. Come on, what did Romeo say?

NURSE

Do you have permission to go out and take confession today?

JULIET

I do.

NURSE

Then hurry up and rush over to Friar Laurence's cell. There's a husband there who's waiting to make you his wife. Now I see the blood rushing to your cheeks. You blush bright red as soon as you hear any news. Go to the church. I must go by a different path to get a rope ladder. Your love will use it to climb up to your window when it's dark. Go, I'll go to lunch. You go to Friar Laurence's cell.

JULIET

Wish me luck. Thank you, dear Nurse.

They exit.

"OMG, our families are gonna be PSYCHED."

- Juliet

This scene is in verse except for one bit (marked with a *) Why do you think the Nurse switches to prose there? What changes?





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You can respond to these in any way you choose:

Write

Draw

THINK ABOUT IT

... up to you!

Talk about it

ACT IT OUT



Why is Peter in the scene?

He doesn't say anything, but Shakespeare went to the trouble of writing him into the script. Why? How does it change the beginning of the scene if you take him out? (You'll need to cut some lines!)



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TACTICS



It's pretty easy to figure out what these characters want in the scene: Juliet wants to know what the Nurse knows, and the Nurse wants to amuse herself by withholding that information. But what about their tactics? How does Juliet try to get the Nurse to spill the beans? How does the Nurse avoid sharing what she knows? Break it down, beat by beat. There are lots of opportunities for the characters to change it up!

This scene is a great example of how Shakespeare embeds stage directions in characters' lines rather than setting them apart. Instead of doing what we usually see in contemporary scripts—for example, in this scene from **Steel Magnolias** (which takes place in a beauty parlor):

TRUVY: No time. Now. You know where the coffee stuff is. Everything else is on a tray next to the stove. (*Truvy removes her smock.*)

ANNELLE: Here. Let me help you. (*Dusts her off.*) You've got little tiny hairs and fuzzies all over you.

He does things like this:

NURSE: My back o' th' other side—ah, my back, my back!

So... what is the stage direction?

As usual, Shakespeare leaves some of this open for interpretation, but generally when a person complains about back pain on a specific side, they gesture towards it. So we can be pretty sure that the Nurse (who is definitely a drama queen) is somehow showing Juliet where her back hurts.

And then Shakespeare gives us punctuation (a dash or a comma, depending on who's editing the text) to tell us that something else happens. Does Juliet ignore the Nurse's gesture? Does she try to help by rubbing her back or helping her sit down or giving her some aspirin? That depends on Juliet's objective: how do you think she'd react—what tactic would she use—to try to reach her goal of getting the Nurse to just *tell her what Romeo said, already*? Does the Nurse's reaction give you any clues?

Can you find any other embedded stage directions in the scene?

Look at Juliet's monologue and forget about the rest of the scene for a minute. She's full of anticipation and frustration, which she expresses in about a thousand ways in just a few lines. What's on her mind? Mark the beginning and end of each thought and find a way to make each of those thoughts really clear.

If you were an actor, how would you play this speech? Let the language lead you. How do these words "want" to be spoken? How do they make you want to move as you speak them?

If you were a director, how would you help Juliet make this speech really pop? Think about movement, timing, and—of course—objectives and tactics.

We always want to keep the characters' relationships in mind, and the Nurse and Juliet have a super interesting one! As you explore the scene, keep in mind that:

- The Nurse has taken care of Juliet her entire life—and, since she talks about having had a baby (who died in infancy) around the time Juliet was born, we know she's old enough to be her mother. We also know that Juliet is just shy of 14 years old.
- But the Nurse *isn't* Juliet's mother. She's employed by Juliet's family (the Capulets).
- Even so, there's clearly a lot of love between these two.

How does this affect their dynamic in this scene? Can you draw on your own life experience to help figure it out? See if you can find that "as if" that gets you as close as possible to the situation. If you can't find it (it's tough sometimes), dig into the text a bit more and see what you come up with.

