

A Note About Adaptation and Source Texts for *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare made extensive use of source texts in adapting stories previously told by other authors. It is clear that Shakespeare relied on a combination of these source texts and his own genius at adapting them in startling new ways, using the exceptional verbal virtuosity that he was able to deploy as a writer. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, in their introductory essay to *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays* (Routledge 2000) state “Shakespeare himself was an adapter, taking existing materials from various sources and crafting them into ‘new’ artistic creations” (1). Geoffrey Bullough’s monumental 8-volume work *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, first published in 1957, gives an exhaustive rendering of the many sources Shakespeare drew upon to create his own “original” works. But Shakespeare’s originality was as much a function of his skill at adapting pre-existing sources as it was about his vast knowledge of how to convey narrative effectively across a range of theatrical genres.

The irony is that Shakespeare’s originality and authenticity derive from source texts and the adaptive twists and elaborations Shakespeare was able to create in a language uniquely his own. Since then, there has been a growing struggle between different interpretive camps that argue either for an equivalent adaptive approach to Shakespeare’s works (freely adapting them as suits the interpretation) or for a more classical approach that seeks to treat Shakespeare’s texts as sacrosanct and immutable. As Fischlin and Fortier note, “much of the long history of appreciating and thinking about Shakespeare has stressed his unsurpassed originality, the sanctity of his texts, and the cultural taboo on presuming to alter them” (ibid.).

A wonderful example of recent work that imagines Shakespeare’s own creative spark being lit by other playwrights’ works is evident in graphic novelist, Nick Craine’s dramatization of Shakespeare’s life, *Parchment of Light*. Craine, in the panel shown below, shows Shakespeare attending a performance of Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* at the Rose Theatre and literally having the lines come to inhabit him. Craine envisages Shakespeare being moved by others’ words to the point that he himself begins the arc of his own creative trajectory. And, clearly, Craine suggests that Shakespeare’s creativity did not arise out of nothing but was sparked by pre-existing work.

Qualitätsmerkmale
PDF-Dokumenteigenschaften
wie Metadaten und die Größe.

A common misconception is that Shakespeare invented the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. In fact, his play is a dramatisation of Arthur Brooke's narrative poem *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562). Shakespeare

followed Brooke's poem but improved it considerably by adding extra detail to both major and minor characters, in particular the Nurse and Mercutio.

Brooke's poem was not original either, being a translation and adaptation of *Giuletta e Romeo*, by Matteo Bandello, included in his *Novelle* of 1554. This was in turn an adaptation of Luigi da Porto's *Giulietta e Romeo*, included in his *Istoria novellamente ritrovata di due Nobili Amanti* (c. 1530). This latter text is the version that gave the story much of its modern form, including the names of the lovers, the rival families of the Montecchi and Capuleti, and the location in Verona, in the Veneto. The earliest-known version of the tale is the 1476 story of Mariotto and Gianozza of Siena by Masuccio Salernitano, in *Il Novellino* (*Novella XXXIII*).

Bandello's story, however, was the most famous and was translated into French (and into English by Brooke). It was also adapted by Italian theatrical troupes, some of who performed in London at the time that Shakespeare was writing his plays. One such performance or script could have inspired Shakespeare's version of *Romeo and Juliet*.

This story of ill-fated, "star-crossed" lovers had obvious parallels with similar tales told throughout history, including those of Hero and Leander, Pyramus and Thisbe, Floris and Blanchefleur, Troilus and Cressida, Antony and Cleopatra, Layla and Majnun, Tristan and Iseult, Shirin and Farhad and Hagbard and Signy. Shakespeare was familiar with these stories, some of which were included in his other plays. The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe appears in comic mode in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, while the Trojan War lovers, Troilus and Cressida, were given a history play of their own by Shakespeare.

Although it is unknown exactly which sources Shakespeare might have specifically referenced when writing *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, the details of the plot can be traced back to the very beginning of the tragic tradition. In literature, lovers have been separated by fate someone who was thought to be dead, mourned, entombed but then awakened can be traced back via poems, prose and classical legends to the very earliest origins of the tragic tradition. Many ancient myths (e.g. Demeter and Persephone, Orpheus and Eurydice) have resurrection motifs. In the second century AD the *Ephesiaca* by Xenophon of Ephesus tells of two teenagers, Anthia and Habrocomes, who fall in love and marry. Anthia becomes separated from her husband and is rescued from robbers by a man

named Perilaus, who then seeks to marry her. To escape this second marriage Anthia bribes a physician to prescribe her a potion with which to commit suicide. Unknowing to her, he actually gives her a drug that will merely feign death. She swallows this potion on her wedding day. Thought dead, she is interred in a tomb where she awakens only to be carried away by tomb-robbers. Habrocomes learns of Anthia's apparent death and hastens to her tomb. After many twists of plot he is reunited with Anthia. It is thought that Shakespeare had no knowledge of this tale.

By the 15th century, many more familiar features of the story were developed. Masuccio Salernitano's 1476 *Cinquante Novelle* includes the previously mentioned story of Mariotto and Giannozza of Sienna who are secretly married by a friar. Mariotto is banished after he kills a citizen in a quarrel, and Giannozza's father arranges a marriage for her. The friar provides Giannozza with a sleeping potion; she is thought dead and entombed. In the meantime word is sent to Mariotto of her plan. The message never reaches him as the messenger is attacked by robbers, so when Giannozza sets sail for Alexandria to be with her love, Mariotto returns home to mourn Giannozza. While attempting to open her tomb, Mariotto is arrested and beheaded. Giannozza witnesses the execution, cradles the fallen head and subsequently dies of a broken heart. As Salernitano referred to the two protagonists as contemporaries, they have since been considered quasi-historical characters.

The later version by Luigi da Porto (1485-1529) in his *Istoria novellamente ritrovata di due nobili amanti* transfers the events to Verona, renames the lovers Romeo and Giulietta, and specifies a feud between the Montecchi and the Cappelletti. The story follows the familiar line with Romeo returning and finding Giulietta seemingly dead. He takes a poison and Giulietta awakens in time to speak with Romeo before he dies. She commits suicide by holding her breath. Learning of the tragic circumstances, the feuding families are reconciled. Da Porto created several characters including Marcuccio (Mercutio), Theobaldo (Tybalt), Friar Lorenzo (Friar Laurence) and the Conti de Lodrone (Paris).

Da Porto's life story is almost as romantic. A heroic, good-looking, and brave young man, he was left for dead in 1510 after a battle between the Venetians and Impérials. He survived, but was seriously disfigured. His Venetian general, mindful of his good looks, wrote, "Odious is the victory that costs so high a price!" Da Porto retreated from the world and gave himself over to literature. His touching and tender *Giulietta e Romeo* made

him famous throughout literate Italy. He died at age 43.

Matteo Bandello—a writer, the bishop of Agen, diplomat, and soldier as well as a confidant of Niccolò Machiavelli—refined da Porto's story for his anthology of stories, *Novelle* (1554, 1573), which was itself based on Boccaccio's anthology of stories, the *Decameron* (1354). Besides Bandello's adaptation of da Porto, the basic plot of *Romeo and Juliet* was further translated and elaborated by Pierre Boaistuau and François de Belleforest (in *Histoires tragiques des oeuvres italiens de Bandel* [Paris, 1559]). Belleforest's text was a French translation of Bandello (that would eventually amount to seven volumes with one of its stories becoming the source text for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), acquiring a conspiratorial nurse and a young man who would evolve into Benvolio. Bandello's narrative was adapted into French by Boaistuau, with heavy emphasis on the story's inherent morality and sentimentality. Moreover, in this complex web of textual circulation, Boaistuau added to Belleforest's *Histoires tragiques*, which was to become the basis of William Painter's English translation in the *Palace of Pleasure* (1567). Bandello's version portrays Romeo as at first in love with Rosalind before he meets with Juliet. And unlike Bandello, who portrays Juliet as 18 years of age, it was Shakespeare's version that made her four years younger.



Matteo Bandello, engraving by Lapi for a 1791 edition of the *Novelle*

All of this shows how extensively the story was circulating in the sixteenth century in Italian, French, and English—and how variations of the narrative were freely added by the respective writers, translators, and playwrights. Brooke's English poem, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, it should be remembered, was published in 1562, five years before Painter's version. And Brooke relied extensively on Boaistuau, repeating such elements as the bedroom scene, the love-conflict, and the apothecary.

Whether or not Shakespeare read or knew of Boaistuau is uncertain—but he would still have been able to get key elements of Boaistuau’s storyline via Brooke’s adaptation.

To further complicate matters, Bernard Garter had published in 1563 an imitation of Brooke’s poem, *Two English Lovers*, which placed the story of the ill-fated lovers in an English setting. Moreover, it is clear that the general storyline of *Romeo and Juliet* was popular during the reign of Elizabeth 1. The great English publisher Richard Tottel (whose *Tottel’s Miscellany* [1557] introduced a large number of English readers to Italian poetic forms like the sonnet and the canzone) received a license to reprint Brooke’s work in 1582. In 1587 Robt. Robinson reprinted Brooke’s poem, with the title page announcing that the story presented “a rare example of true constancie, with the subtile counsels and practices of an old fryer and their ill event.”

As mentioned earlier, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, the long narrative poem (derived from the Italian Bandello) by Arthur Brooke, was Shakespeare’s main source for his play. It too showed evidence of not only the continental European influences from Bandello to Boaistuau, but also of English influences, and in particular Geoffrey Chaucer, the author of the unfinished frame narrative *The Canterbury Tales* and perhaps the first author to demonstrate the artistic legitimacy of the vernacular English language, rather than French, Italian, or Latin. As [Amanda Mabillard](#) states:

Brooke’s translation, 3020 lines in length, is a faithful version of [Bandello], though Brooke also makes additions to the story in his turn, under the influence of the greatest romance narrative in his own language, Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. Brooke’s chief contribution is his emphasis on the power of the ‘blyndfold goddess’ ‘fierce Fortune’ throughout the story, providing a perspective [that] distinctly recalls Chaucer, and without which the verbal borrowings or echoes would have little significance. Brooke’s *Preface* speaks of [dis]honest desire, of the neglect of authority and parental advice, the shame of stolen contracts, the moral to be drawn by the pious reader, but his poem itself shows a warmer understanding of youth, which keeps the reader half-conscious of the spirit of Chaucer for much of the time.

In addition to being influenced by Brooke's poem with its echoes from Chaucer, Shakespeare also showed some (the extent of influence is still being debated) indebtedness to William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure*. The first volume of the *Palace of Pleasure* appeared in 1566, and included sixty tales. It was followed in the next year by a second volume containing thirty-four new ones, the twenty-fifth being the story of *Romeo and Juliet*: "The goodly Hystory of the true, and constant Loue between Rhomeo and Ivlietta, the one of whom died of Poyson, and the other of sorrow, and heuinesse: wherein be comprysed many aduentures of Loue, and other deuises touchinge the same."

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

A second improved edition in 1575 contained seven new stories. Painter borrowed from many classical texts including those by Herodotus, Boccaccio, Plutarch, Aulus Gellius, Aelian, Livy, Tacitus, Quintus Curtius; and from Giovanni Battista Giraldi, Matteo Bandello, Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, Giovanni Francesco Straparola, Queen Marguerite of Navarre and others. The vogue of Painter's and similar collections was one of the reasons why the Italian settings are such an integral part of so many Elizabethan dramas. The early tragedies of Appius and Virginia, and

Tancred and Gismund were taken from *The Palace of Pleasure*. Among better-known plays derived from the Painter's anthology (besides *Romeo and Juliet*) are Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, *Coriolanus*, *All's Well That Ends Well* (from Giletta of Narbonne), and Beaumont and Fletcher's *Triumph of Death* and Shirley's *Loves Cruelty*.

At the time of writing *Romeo and Juliet*, usually attributed to the year 1594/5, Shakespeare was thirty-one and well on his way to a successful theatrical career. Shakespeare dramatically compressed the time scale of events in Brooke's poem from months into four days—from Sunday morning until Thursday morning—and draws his characters with much greater detail and complexity. A number of other features of Brooke's and Shakespeare's respective versions of the plot are worth comparing. Shakespeare, like Brooke, is clearly sympathetic to the couple—and there is a clear sense that Juliet and Romeo meet their end as a result of the failures of their general community, but especially as a result of the adults charged with their rearing, those who in the words of the Prince merely “wink” at “discords” (5.3). Even the Friar, commonly seen as a character who seeks to help the young lovers, is partially responsible—for not ensuring that his letter alerting Romeo to the plot he has concocted actually arrives; and for not being at the tomb early enough to intervene when Romeo commits suicide on seeing Juliet's apparently lifeless body.

Formally, however, the two texts could not be more different, with Shakespeare's iambic pentameter (10 syllable; five stress line), interjection of sonnet forms (in keeping with the Petrarchan conceits of the play), and general flexibility of the language a severe contrast to Brooke's plodding use of poulter's measure. Poulter's measure is a meter consisting of alternate Alexandrines and Fourteeners, that is, 12- and 14-syllable lines. It was often used in the Elizabethan era and the term was coined by George Gascoigne, because poulterers, or poulterers (sellers of poultry), would sometimes give 12 to the dozen, and at other times, 14. As Bullough suggests, “Brooke's poem is a leaden work which Shakespeare transmuted to gold.”

Both Brooke and certain readings of Shakespeare clearly allow room for understanding the play as a critique of overwrought sensuality and sentimentality, with Brooke's preface to the reader clearly stating his position: “The glorious triumphe of the continent man upon the lustes of wanton fleshe, encourageth men to honest restraint of wyld affections, the shamefull and wretched endes of such, as have yelded their libertie thrall to

fowle desires, teache men to withholde them selves from the hedlong fall of loose dishonestie.”

Shakespeare’s work gives greater amplitude and definition to the Nurse and Mercutio while at the same time doing less (and more subtly) with the unseen character of Rosaline and the problematic transition Romeo makes from loving her to loving Juliet. Both Brooke and Shakespeare posit problems with the use of knowledge as deployed by the Friar, especially his use of potions, as a way of resolving complex social and relational issues. The figure of the Apothecary is common to both Shakespeare and Brooke but Shakespeare provides more details about his shop, at which point we also learn about the plague and quarantine that have delayed Friar John from delivering the crucial letter that would have prevented the tragedy. In Brooke’s version Paris is not slain by Romeo in the tomb; and in both poems Romeo, echoing his attempt to defuse Tybalt’s anger earlier in the play, begs the pardon of Tybalt’s course, also interred with Juliet.

Where Shakespeare has the Friar give a condensed version of the misadventures that lead to the tragedy, Brooke gives a full exposition. This is not to say that Brooke’s poem is a complete aesthetic failure—after all it was the source for a play that to this day has powerful resonances in whatever critical or affective terms one sees it. Moreover, Brooke’s more pedestrian work shows off the extent to which the transformation of a source text by Shakespeare’s exceptional talents required significant, independent, and original skills to produce an adaptation of an already much adapted work that has withstood the test of time.

Material intended for academic non-profit use. Reproductions for classroom use permitted.

Copyright © 2007 Daniel Fischlin. Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project.
www.canadianshakespeares.ca. University of Guelph. All Rights Reserved.