Grant W. Smith

NAMES AND SOURCES FOR *ROMEO & JULIET*

Abstract: In his comedies Shakespeare changed most or all the names found in his plot sources, substituting instead names borrowed as analogs from other literature, names taken from common usage, and/or names he coined to describe appearances, actions, or attitudes of his characters. In his histories and tragedies, by contrast, Shakespeare most often relied heavily on the names he found in his plot sources. *Romeo & Juliet* illustrates the usual pattern of Shakespeare's tragedies insofar as he used all the names included in his plot source, a narrative poem by Arthur Brooke entitled *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), which was one of many versions. Thus, his use of names in *Romeo & Juliet* confirms his heavy reliance on his principal source plot. However, Shakespeare also added many names in his distinctive version of the story. He also varied the actions of the characters named and even the forms of a few names. Thus, a complete analysis of *Romeo & Juliet* names helps to illustrate Shakespeare's linguistic creativity, his relative independence from his plot source, and why we generally consider his version of this popular story to be the definitive version.

Keywords: tragedies' naming patterns, coined names, borrowed names, generics, names in common use, forms of address

1. *Introduction*

Romeo and Juliet was Shakespeare's adaptation of a popular story about tragic love that existed in many sources in both Europe and England. Shakespeare's use of names shows his heavy reliance on Arthur Brooke's long narrative poem (3020 lines) entitled *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* published in 1562 (in Bullough 1957, 269-363). He uses all of the names used by Brooke but 1) changes the spelling of one title character, 2) adds two principal names, 3) significantly expands the number of common names and generics, and 4) emphasizes the etymological meanings of names to pursue his unique thematic development of the characters.

Brooke's poem was itself a retelling of a story from *Le Novelle del Bandello* (1554) and a French translation of Bandello in 1559 by Pierre Boiastuaut, which a bit later was again translated into English by William Painter in his *Palace of Pleasure* (1567). A similar and earlier version had appeared in a collection of stories by Luigi da Porto (c. 1530). Geoffrey Bullough

DOI: 10.4454/iNnt.innt.v25.901

summarizes these early versions of the story and reprints Brooke's poem in its entirety (Bullough 1957, 269-363).

Brooke's poem blames the lovers for «thralling themselves to unhonest desire, neglecting the authoritie and advise of parents and friends» (Bullough 1957, 284) and repeatedly cites «Fortunes turning wheele» (323) as the causes of their sad tragedy. Shakespeare's references to «Fortune» as a goddess are far fewer than Brooke's; misfortune results instead from specific human actions and bad timing. In short, Shakespeare shifts the blame away from the lovers' passion and to «the continuance of their parents' rage» («The Prologue», 10). Their love is tragic because it shows a social problem.

2. *Names of the title characters*

As Bullough notes (271), Bandello used the names *Romeo* and *Julietta*, which Brooke altered to *Romeus* and *Juliet*. Shakespeare's reversion to Romeo suggests his preference for an Italian form of the name over the formal and rough sounding Latin masculine nominative, *-us*. It might also be argued that the name Romeo suggests Shakespeare's familiarity with Bandello and/or with the Italian language, perhaps reinforcing his indebtedness to Bandello for the plot of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Also, Painter uses the spelling Rhomeo. It is also simpler to argue that the ending *-o* is more euphonious and thereby decorous as an object of Juliet's love and/or easier to rhyme in English, as suggested by Weis (2012, 120).

Shakespeare retains Brooke's use of Juliet for the heroine, even though the diminutive *Julietta* might strengthen the theme of youth and inexperience. The thematic use of the diminutive is clear in the second scene of *Measure for Measure*. Mistress Overdone and Claudio both use *Julietta* suggesting the youth and innocence of the character otherwise referred to as Juliet in all other instances within that play (the suffix *-etta* meaning 'little' in Italian). On the other hand, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* offers a counter example; it is a much earlier play, and Shakespeare is linguistically conservative, consistently using the form Julia, derived from an old Roman family name, for the young girl devoted to Proteus. Sixteenth century literature often associated the name in various forms with romantic love and with a newly pubescent girl besotted with her first love.

Although he does not use the diminutive suffix with the name, Shakespeare still emphasizes the associated values of youth, inexperience, and idealism in his character by changing her specified age. Painter's translation of the Bandello version says that Juliet is 18, and Brooke says that she is 16. Thus, Shakespeare emphasizes her youth even more by reducing her

age still further, i.e., to less than 14: «On Lammas Eve at night shall she be fourteen: That shall she, marry; I remember it well» (1.3.21-22). His reduction of her age might also be a deliberate enhancement of her social status (because of more arranged marriages among the aristocracy), but it more clearly emphasizes her initial and total incognizance of romantic interests. To her, marriage is no more than «an honor that I dream not of» (1.3.66). Thus, Shakespeare's phrasing makes Juliet's first feeling of true love all the more intense and thematically central because she feels it only when she first sees Romeo.

3. *Names borrowed from Brooke with classical analogs or etymological meanings*

Brooke often refers to classical deities, but he makes little effort to exploit the classical or etymological meanings of names. For example, he refers to Mercutio only briefly as a coldhearted ladies' man at the ball, «courteous of his speche» (Bullough 1957, 292) but with icy hands. His cold hand contrasts with Romeo's warm hand. Brooke makes no mention whatsoever of Mercutio's ingenuity or wit, of his friendship with Romeo, of his kinship to the prince, or of his fight with Tybalt.

Shakespeare, however, seizes on the name Mercutio to develop one of the most complex and imaginative characters in all his plays. His use of the name clearly suggests an allusion to the Roman god Mercury, the son of Maia and Jupiter, messenger of the gods, noted for his cleverness and quickness, and viewed as a mediator between divine and human wisdom. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, he is tasked by Jupiter to free the beautiful Io, who has been turned into a heifer by Juno and guarded by Argus, a monster with a hundred eyes. To free her, Mercury poses as a shepherd «playing tunes upon his pipe of reeds» (Ovid 204, 1.938). Argus welcomes Mercury's company, who «whiles away the hours, chattering/ of this and that – and playing on his pipes» (946-947). Mercutio's description of Queen Mab as the bringer of dreams is also lyrical chatter; it echoes the wording of Ovid's description of the god. Romeo objects, «Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!/ Thou talk'st of nothing» (1.4.95-96). Ovid's story ends with Argus falling totally asleep, after which Mercury cuts off his head and frees Io, object of Jupiter's love. Romeo finds Mercutio's talk about dreams similarly ominous: «my mind misgives/ Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars/ Shall bitterly begin his fearful date» (1.5.106-108). Romeo's forebodings prove true for both himself and Mercutio, illustrating Shakespeare's eager use of mythological parallels in his development of characters.

Shakespeare also develops the name Escalus by exploiting its etymological meaning for thematic depth and breadth. Brooke introduces the name briefly as the prince, who «alone dyd raigne» (Bullough 1957, 286) in Verona, but there is no brawl as we see at the beginning of *Romeo & Juliet* and no condemnation of fighting. Thus, Brooke's use of the name might be a simple «Latin version of Della Scala […] a family which ruled Verona from 1260 to 1389», as Davis and Frankforter suggest (2004, 156). Shakespeare mentions the name only in a stage direction but emphasizes the judicial role of the character with his first appearance. Escalus tells the fighters to «hear the sentence of your moved prince» (1.1.87) and orders Capulet and Montague to come before him in «old Freetown, our common judgment place» (1.1.101).

Thus, Shakespeare appears to emphasize a Latin derivation of the name (accessible to most students in Elizabethan grammar schools) that refers to the image of justice as a set of uneven scales. It projects a philosophical and ironic view of disproportionate justice that adumbrates the entire play. For example, Shakespeare enhances the ironic point of view by interposing Mercutio's death as a motive for Romeo's revenge and for his banishment by Escalus. In Brooke's version, Mercutio has no role in the fighting. For Brooke, Romeus's only motive in killing Tybalt is self-defense. However, in *Romeo & Juliet*, Mercutio is kinsman to Escalus, whose own blood, therefore, «for your rude brawls doth lie a-bleeding» (3.1.188). Romeo is, in fact, responsible for Mercutio's death, and so Escalus has a personal reason for banishing Romeo that transcends the simple rationale of self-defense. He also sentences Romeo to less than death promised earlier to those who «disturb our streets again» (1.1.94). Presumably, the sentence is less than death because Romeo avenged the death of the Prince's kin. The nuances show that the feud hurts the whole community, not just the individuals involved.

Shakespeare's philosophical view of justice is also clear if we compare Escalus's actions at the end of the story. Brooke describes the prince as a judge who sentences others exactly as they deserve: «The nurse of Juliet, is banisht in her age,/ Because that from the parentes she dyd hyde the marriage» and «Thapothecary, high is hanged by the throte» (Bullough 1957, 362). These judgments constitute a simplistic resolution to the story. In *Romeo & Juliet*, Escalus casts blame on the human condition, even «I, for winking at your discords too,/ Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punished» (5.3.294-295). The name thereby refers to an ironic sense of justice by which everyone's errors become the instruments of tragedy.

The name Paris potentially alludes to one of the most prominent characters in classical literature, namely the Trojan prince who stole Helen,

presumably the world's most beautiful woman, from her husband, the Greek king, Menelaus, and thereby precipitated the 'Trojan War.' According to legend, Paris was the son of Priam and Hecuba, king and queen of Troy. However, in Hecuba's pregnancy, Æsacus prophesied that the child would cause the downfall of Troy. To avoid the prophecy, the infant was abandoned on Mt. Ida but was rescued and raised by a herdsman. As a remarkably handsome young teenager, he was chosen by three goddesses, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, to judge their relative beauty. That event, often referred to as «The Judgment of Paris», has been the subject of many works of art. Each goddess offered Paris bribes, and he chose Aphrodite because she promised to provide him with the world's most beautiful woman.

When Paris competed with surprising success in Troy's athletic games, he was recognized and welcomed as a lost member of the royal family. When living as a herdsman, Paris had married Oenone, but when he visited Sparta on a diplomatic mission, he seduced (some accounts say 'raped') Helen and took her back to Troy, abandoning Oenone. The Greeks then besieged Troy to retrieve Helen, as described in *The Iliad* and in various poems referred to collectively as the «Epic Cycle». Homer consistently portrays Paris as an eager lover but reluctant warrior. Later in the Trojan War, Paris kills Achilles with a poisoned arrow and is soon wounded in turn by the Greek archer, Philoctetes. Paris returns to Oenone for a treatment only she can give, but she spurns him because of his faithlessness.

In *Romeus and Juliet*, Brooke mentions only two attributes of Paris similar to the classical characterizations, his beauty and nobility – i.e., «the fewters of his face» and «an Earle he had to syre» (Bullough 1957, 334). Also, Brooke refers to Paris briefly and only twice: firstly, when Capilet solicits the interests of the young gentlemen of Verona in marrying his daughter, and secondly, when Capilet asks Paris to show up on Wednesday to wed Juliet. Thus, Brooke's use of the name is clearly a classical allusion, but the character is not at all developed with thoughts or feelings.

Shakespeare, by contrast, seizes upon many of the classical allusions of the name and develops the character in ways consistent with those allusions. The Nurse, for example, talks about the beauty of Paris: «O, he's a lovely gentleman!/ Romeo's a dishclout to him» (3.5.220-221). Capulet brags that he has recruited a groom «of noble parentage,/ Of fair demesnes, youthful, and nobly lined,/ Stuffed, as they say, with honorable parts» (3.5.181-183). Of course, the mythological Paris was himself socially ambitious, but Friar Lawrence calls out the opportunism of Juliet's parents: «The most you sought was her promotion» (4.5.71). Shakespeare emphasizes the self-indulgence and superficiality of Paris, much as he does with a character of

the same name in *Troilus and Cressida*, where Paris selfishly chooses the company of Helen and sensual pleasures over battle.

In his first appearance in *Romeo & Juliet*, Paris eagerly seeks Capulet's permission to marry Juliet: «what say you to my suit?» (1.2.5), to which Capulet demurs. That is to say, Paris has initiated the proposal rather than Juliet's father, as Brooke has it. Later, Paris and Capulet discuss the timing of the marriage. Capulet teases him about his sexual interest: «Will you be ready? Do you like this haste?» (3.4.22), and Paris eagerly responds, «My lord, I would that Thursday were tomorrow» (3.4.29). Lady Capulet also hints at the libidinous joys of the proposed couple: «The County Paris, at Saint Peter's Church,/ Shall happily make thee there a joyful bride» (3.5.115-116). When he visits Friar Lawrence, Paris again speaks of his romantic eagerness and coarsely suggests to Juliet, «on Thursday early will I rouse thee» (4.1.42).

As depicted in *Romeo & Juliet*, Paris's nobility is, in fact, waxen. The Nurse seems to praise him as «a man of wax» (1.3.76), but she is unwittingly ironic because wax melts with heat or is easily erased as a writing tablet. The Friar, by contrast, excoriates the blubbering Romeo: «Fie, fie, thou shamest thy shape, thy love, thy wit… Thy noble shape is but a form of wax» (3.3.122-126). The waxen metaphor is reinforced by the manner of Paris's death. He scatters flowers in front of the Capulet tomb, a sentimental gesture that humanizes the character, but Shakespeare's invention of this scene focuses the denouement on the firmer, even fierce, commitment of Romeo's love. Romeo pleads with Paris, «tempt not a desp'rate man» (5.3.59), but Paris pompously insists, «I do defy thy conjuration/ And apprehend thee for a felon here» (68-69). They fight, Paris dies, and the dramatic focus is all the more narrowed to the determined and altruistic love of Romeo and Juliet.

Unlike Meructio, Escalus, and Paris, the etymology of Tybalt is not classical but still thematically illustrative. Shakespeare uses the name to allude to an old cliché of «fighting like cats and dogs» (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, accessed 02/18/2022), which enhances the contentiousness between the Capulets and Montagues. At the beginning of the play, Sampson starts the opening brawl by calling an opposing servant, «A dog of the house of Montague» (1.1.7), associating the Montagues with dogs. Later, Mercutio taunts Tybalt as a «ratcatcher» (3.1.74), associating the Capulets with cats. Brooke sometimes spells the name as Tibalt, and other similar spellings appear in earlier sources (e.g., Tibaldo in Bandello) that likewise carry an allusion to cats (as noted by Davis Frankforter 2004, 494). Shakespeare uses this traditional association to typify Tybalt as the «Good King of Cats» (3.1.76). That is to say, he puns on the meanings of Tybert and Tibert, «a quasi-proper name for any cat» (*OED* II 1971, 3316) alluding to the cliché

and thereby amplifying the bitterness of the feud as the central cause of the tragedy.

4. *Other borrowings from Brooke*

Altogether, Brooke uses relatively few names. Besides those already mentioned, he also names fryer Lawrence, frier John, and Peter, described as a personal servant to Romeus. Shakespeare uses the names of the two friars in much the same way as Brooke does, i.e., with little thematic elaboration. Thus, they illustrate Shakespeare's relative reliance on Brooke's poem. In both versions of the story, Friar Lawrence is a pivotal character, and, as noted by Davis and Frankforter (2004, 276), Friar Lawrence also appears briefly in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which might suggest Shakespeare's familiarity with Brooke's poem even before writing the earlier play.

However, Shakespeare makes a distinctive change with the name Peter. In Brooke's poem, Peter is Romeus' servant, who fetches a rope ladder and, later, an iron bar to open the gate of the tomb. In *Romeo & Juliet*, Peter is the illiterate servant of Capulet, who asks Romeo to read the guest list for the masked ball (1.2). It is a scene invented by Shakespeare for comic purposes, and Will Kempe played the role, as we can see in the speech prefixes of the first quarto. Peter also appears in a second comic scene in which he insults the musicians who have come to play for a wedding but find that Juliet has apparently died. Peter insults them with names coined from musical terms – Simon Catling, Hugh Rebeck, and James Soundpost – but these coinages make him appear foolish, and the musicians dismiss him as «a pestilent knave» (4.5.140). The name Peter appears in the second quarto (1599) after Kempe left *The Chamberlain's Men*, and so Shakespeare probably did not use the name as a borrowing but as a common name casually substituted for the «Clown» (as Kempe was often labeled) in these comic scenes.

For Romeo's servant at the end of the play, Shakespeare uses the name Balthasar. It is a coinage rather than a borrowing. With varied spellings, the name was traditionally associated with one of the three wise men, specifically a young African. Shakespeare uses it for trusted servants in four plays (*The Comedy of Errors*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo & Juliet*). Thematic associations are speculative, but *The Chamberlain's Men* hired Black musicians who may have been occasionally assigned bit parts or used as extras on stage. Thus, this name may have been a simple nickname for a common hireling.

5. *Other coinages*

Shakespeare often enriches his thematic development by adding coinages, common names, and generics. Among the coinages, Potpan is the most obvious. It is a simple *lexical equivalent*, perhaps a nickname used by the «Servingman» (1.5.1) to describe a more menial Capulet servant who clears away the dishes and works in the kitchen. The name suggests his low status, and his snarky response to his supervisor, the Servingman, would have pleased many apprentices in Shakespeare's audience. Shakespeare also enhances the humor of the scene by adding common names of other servants – i.e., Susan Grindstone (who sharpens knives?), Nell, and Anthony.

However, Benvolio is the most important coinage in *Romeo & Juliet* and provides a clear example of how the imaginative process might have sometimes worked. Brooke's story begins with Romeus wasting away his days and nights moaning for the love of a scornful woman. In response, «His kindred and al[l]yes do wonder what he ayles» (Bullough 1957, 99). Then «the trustiest of his feeres» (Bullough 1957, 101), fearing for Romeus's health, rebukes him and persuades him to swear «a solemne othe» (145) to «resort where Ladies wont to meete» (148), thereby to judge if other ladies are not more beautiful and accepting than the one who scorns him. According to Brooke, the advice of this well-intentioned friend is dramatically ironic in the simplest sense. It is meant to save Romeus, but it leads him instead to the banquet «fyrst in Capels house» (290). There he finds a different love that, in fact, leads to his death. As Brooke explains, «False Fortune cast for him […] a myschiefe newe to brewe» (290). Shakespeare seized upon Brooke's plainly stated irony and named this trusty companion *Benvolio*. It is an etymological coinage meaning 'well-intentioned' in Italian. Thus, the name heightens the thematic irony of Brooke's phrasing, suggesting even more that our fates may lie beyond our best intentions.

Shakespeare also coins the name Rosaline (1.2.70) for the scornful young lady causing Romeo's initial melancholy. He also uses this name in *Love's Labour's Lost* for the object of Berowne's infatuation, and it is also the etymological twin of *Rosalind*, the principal character of *As You Like It*. Spenser made the name famous in *The Shepherd's Calendar*. It has Germanic origins with a Latin etymology meaning 'pretty rose' and is commonly associated with femininity. In Rosalind's first appearance in *As You Like It*, Celia calls her, «my sweet Rose, my dear Rose, be merry» (1.2.23). When Romeo goes to Capulet's masked ball, he expects to see Rosaline there but, instead, falls in love at-first-sight with Juliet. Rosaline never actually appears, and Benvolio, who prompted Romeo's fateful venture to the masked ball, fades from any subsequent action.

6. *Generics and names in common use*

Brooke uses just two generics, the loquacious «nurce» and the impoverished «Apothecary», while making scattered references to «kyndred» and «feeres» (meaning 'companions', *OED* 1, 978). Shakespeare follows Brooke in the use of these references, but adds irony in the phrasing of the Nurse (e.g., praising Paris as «a man of wax», noted above). Another important generic is Shakespeare's use of a «Chorus» to express his distinctive thematic view, i.e., shifting blame more to the «parents' strife» (Prologue 1) than to the lovers and actually extolling the lovers' passion and danger, «Temp'ring extremities with extreme sweet» (Prologue 2). He also enriches most scenes with additional generics to fill the stage, inject humor, and lend verisimilitude – e.g., attendants, citizens, pages, guests, gentlewomen, officers, guards, watchmen, and musicians (as noted above).

Shakespeare also added common names for similar effects. For example, Sampson, Gregory, and Abram are Servingmen who start the brawl with which the play begins and which emphasizes the contentiousness of the two houses as the central cause of the tragedy. *Sampson* was a common name at the time, but it also alludes to the Hebrew strongman in the Book of Judges. Sampson is apparently the biggest man on stage and the most belligerent. After biting his thumb at Abram, he asks Gregory, «Is the Law on our side» (1.1.45). The answer is «No, » but Sampson draws his sword, and the brawl begins as Tybalt lustily joins the fray. The futility of Benvolio's efforts to stop the fighting shows the seriousness of the feud and the threat it will pose to the lovers. Common names also enhance other scenes, such as Susan Grindstone, Nell, and Anthony in the kitchen scene (noted above).

7. *Forms of address*

As a type of reference, Brooke and Shakespeare both rely on forms of address in a way common for the time, i.e., by using the family name in referring to the contentious houses of Capilet and Montagew. Brooke also uses the family name and specifies their relationship to Juliet in referring to her parents. That is to say, he uses the name, «Capilet», for Juliet's father and the generic «her mother» or «his wife» in referring to Juliet's mother. Shakespeare uses the Capulet name in much the same way. Brooke also refers to Romeus' father by the family name of Montagew (sometimes Montague) but omits any reference to his mother. Shakespeare gives «Montague's Wife» a speaking role and uses her as an additional voice for peace,

«Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe» (1.1.79). He thereby strengthens thematic blame on the feud rather than on the lovers.

Shakespeare also adds a brief scene with «cousin Capulet», a common form of address, to illustrate an important ancillary theme of emerging youth and demographic displacement. Juliet's father urges his «good cousin Capulet» (1.5.30) to sit down because «you and I are past our dancing days» (31). The father and «cousin» debate how long it has been since they were «in a mask» (33) themselves. The «cousin» proves that it has been over thirty years, which Juliet's father can hardly believe: «Will you tell me that?» (40). Juliet was obviously sired a bit late in her father's romantic life, and he is reluctant to acknowledge her maturation and independence. In a preceding scene he asks Paris to «Let two more summers wither in their pride/ Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride» (1.2.10-11). Shakespeare's point is that Juliet is, in fact, ready to awaken romantically and that youthful passion will inevitably lend the lovers the power to overcome the «extremities» (Chorus 2.14) posed by «their parents' rage» (Chorus 1, 10).

8. *Summary*

Shakespeare's thematic interests differ fundamentally from what we find in Arthur Brooke's long narrative poem, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, on which Shakespeare relied heavily as a plot source and from which he borrowed all the names Brooke used. However, Shakespeare shifts blame away from the presumably *unhonest desire* of the lovers and to «their parents' strife» (Chorus 1, 8) and the cultural context. He reverts the name of the title character to Romeo making it more euphonious and attractive as the object of Juliet's love. He adds many common names and generics and especially the names of Rosaline and Benvolio as pivots in the direction of Romeo's interests. Most importantly, however, Shakespeare emphasizes the classical and etymological meanings of names (e.g., Mercutio) to pursue his development of distinctive themes and characters.

References

G. Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol. 1, New York, Columbia University Press 1957.

J. Madison Davis, Daniel A. Frankforter, *The Shakespeare Name Dictionary*, New York, Routledge 2004.

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, *s.v.* «fight like cats and dogs», accessed February 18, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fight%20like%20cats%20and%20dogs.

OED. *Abbreviations for the Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dicionary*, 2 Vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Ovid, *Ovid: Metamorphoses*, Trans. Charles Martin, New York, W. W. Norton 2004.

William Shakespeare, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, Gen. eds. Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller, New York, Penguin Books 2002.

R. Weis (ed.), *Romeo and Juliet*, New York, Bloomsbury, The Arden Shakespeare 2012.

Biodata: Grant W. Smith, Prof. Emeritus at Eastern Washington University, is a former president of ANS, vice president of ICOS, 33 years on the Washington Board on Geographic Names, and has hosted many international scholars. Current work emphasizes literary onomastics and philosophy of language, but previous publications include American Indian languages and the emotive effects of language sounds.

grantsmith137@gmail.com