

LITERARY/HISTORICAL BACKGROUND For *Romeo and Juliet*

The Date and Source of the Play

Romeo and Juliet is one of the early plays of Shakespeare. It was probably written in 1594 or 1595, for it is similar in language to *A Midsummer's Night Dream* and *Richard II*. Some scholars, however, date the drama to 1591, for there is a reference made by the nurse in the play to an earthquake that happened eleven years earlier. The actual earthquake in Italy occurred in 1580. The majority of scholars today place the play after 1594.

Shakespeare drew most of his plots from European stories that had been translated into English. *Romeo and Juliet* was probably based on an Italian romance.

Time Of Action

There is no clear indication within the play of the time setting, but it seems to be around 1200 or 1300. In history, rival noble houses existed within that time frame, and their actions disturbed the local peace. People were divided, and a lot of jealousy and tyranny existed. In the play wealth, culture, rivalry, and enmity are all displayed, reflecting this historical time frame.

The time that passes within the play is very clear. Only five days go by from the opening street fight to the death of Romeo and Juliet.

- **On Sunday** morning, the brawl in the town square occurs; that same night Romeo meets Juliet at the Capulet feast, and they declare their love for one another.
- **On Monday** afternoon, Friar Lawrence marries the couple; later in the day, Romeo kills Tybalt.
- **On Tuesday**, Romeo flees from Verona to Mantua, the Capulets announce Juliet's engagement to Paris, and she drinks the magic potion that makes her appear to be dead.
- **On Wednesday**, Juliet's body is discovered and taken to the Capulet tomb.
- **On Thursday**, Romeo hears of Juliet's death, hastens back to Verona, and commits suicide in her tomb. When Juliet awakens later in the day and finds him dead, she stabs herself.
- The play ends on **Friday** morning.