

Such plays as these, although each gave promise of a dramatic capacity out of the common way, cannot be with certainty pronounced to be beyond the ability of other men. It was in 'Romeo and Juliet,' Shakespeare's first tragedy, that he proved himself the possessor of a poetic and dramatic instinct of unprecedented quality. In 'Romeo and Juliet' he turned to account a tragic romance of Italian origin, which was already popular in English versions. Arthur Broke rendered it into English verse from the Italian of Bandello in 1562, and William Painter had published it in prose in his 'Palace of Pleasure' in 1567. Shakespeare made little change in the plot as drawn from Bandello by Broke, but he impregnated it with poetic fervour, and relieved the tragic intensity by developing the humour of Mercutio, and by grafting on the story the new comic character of the Nurse. The ecstasy of youthful passion is portrayed by Shakespeare in language of the highest lyric beauty, and although a predilection for quibbles and conceits occasionally passes beyond the author's control, 'Romeo and Juliet,' as a tragic poem on the theme of love, has no rival in any literature. If the Nurse's remark, "'Tis since the earthquake now eleven years' (I. iii. 23), be taken literally, the composition of the play must be referred to 1591, for no earthquake in the sixteenth century was experienced in England after 1580. There are a few parallelisms with Daniel's 'Complainte of Rosamond,' published in 1592, and it is probable that Shakespeare completed the piece in that year. It was first printed anonymously and surreptitiously by John Danter in 1597 from an imperfect acting copy. A second quarto of 1599 (by T. Creede for Cuthbert Burbie) was printed from an authentic version, but the piece had probably undergone revision since its first production. Of the original representation on the stage of three other pieces of the period we have more explicit information. These reveal Shakespeare undisguisedly as an adapter of plays by other hands. Though they lack the interest attaching to his unaided work, they throw invaluable light on some of his early methods of composition and his early relations with other dramatists.

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