from A Natural History of Love

by Diane Ackerman

In Romeo's day there were some unstated rules to follow about courting. In this essay, author Diane Ackerman explains the rules of love in the 16th century.

Arranged marriages were a hand-me-down custom known to all, but at about this time, amazingly, a significant number of people began to object. Shakespeare's plays are filled with collisions over the right to choose whom to marry, and complaints by couples who'd prefer a love match. Shakespeare didn't invent the best known of them, Romeo and Juliet, leading characters in a classic that had been told in sundry cultures and genres. In the second century A.D., Xenophon of Ephesus presented the story as *Anthia and Abrocomas,* but it may have been older than that. Over the years it fed many imaginations, and its hero and heroine changed names. In 1535, Luigi da Porto spun the tale as a slow-moving melodrama in a novel with an eighteen-year-old heroine named *La Giuletta.* The story was still being written in the latter half of the sixteenth century, in poetry and prose, and even the distinguished Spanish writer Lope de Vega wrote a drama called *Capulets and Montagues.* In telling the story yet again, Shakespeare was doing what Leonard Bernstein and collaborators did with *West Side Story,* putting a well-known, shopworn tale into contemporary dress, locale, and issues. They knew people would identify with the heartbreak of "Juliet and her Romeo,"* as it's so often described, focusing on the romantic hopes of the girl. Referring to it in that way makes "Romeo" sound less like a man than a condition or trait possessed by Juliet.

A beautiful, chaste Veronese girl, whose very name is rhyme (Juliet Capulet) encounters a boy who embodies her robust sensuality. He is passion incarnate, someone in love with love. "Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs," he at first tells his friend Benvolio, and then decides it isn't gentle, but "too rough, / Too rude, too boisterous, and it pricks like thorn." On the rebound from a girl named Rosaline, and electric with need, Romeo is like lightning looking for a place to strike. He meets Juliet and the play's thunderstorm of emotions begins.

The story hinges on the rivalry between two noble houses, and the forbidden love of their children, Romeo and Juliet. Chance, destiny, and good playwriting ordain that they shall meet and become "star-crossed lovers" with a sad, luminous fate. Typically adolescent, the lovers feel the same bliss, suffer the same torments, and tackle the same obstacles young lovers always have. One age-old note is that they must keep their love a secret from their parents, a theme beautifully expressed in the ancient Egyptian love poems. The erotic appeal of the forbidden stranger also is an old theme, whether he's from the enemy's camp or just "the wrong side of the tracks." So is the notion of love as detachment, a force that pulls you away from your family, your past, your friends, even your neighborhood. Old, too, is the idea of love as a madness; and the fetishistic desire to be an

*"The closing lines of the play are:

> For never was a story of more woe
> Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

article of clothing worn by the beloved ("O, that I were a glove upon that hand, / That I might touch that cheek!" Romeo cries), echoing, centuries later, the Egyptian love poet's desire to "be her ring, the seal on her finger."

Shakespeare made important changes in his telling of the story. In his play, Juliet is thirteen years old; in the other versions she's older. In his play, she and Romeo only know one another for four days in July; in other versions, the courtship lasts months. Even if we accept the gossip of his time that Italian girls mature faster than English ones—why does he make the couple so young and their love instantaneous? Shakespeare was about thirty when he wrote the play, and as his exquisite sonnets declare, he knew love's terrain. Indeed, in one sonnet he laments the mistake of introducing his male lover to his female lover. Apparently, they fell for each other and left Shakespeare high and dry, in double grief. I think he wished to demonstrate in *Romeo and Juliet* how reckless, labile, and ephemeral the emotion of love is, especially in young people, and especially if one compares it with the considered love of older people. Most of the heroines in his other plays are also very young.* Throughout the plays, one finds the tenets of courtly love, but with two exceptions: love always leads to matrimony, and Shakespeare does not condone adultery. The lovers have to be young, of good social rank, well dressed, and of virtuous character. The man has to be courageous, the woman chaste and beautiful. Rarely are the lovers introduced. They fall in love at first sight, the beauty of the beloved's face signaling everything they need to know.

*For example, both Miranda in *The Tempest* and Viola in *Twelfth Night* are only about fifteen, and Marina in *Pericles* is fourteen.

Danger usually lurks close by, but they are headstrong, powerless to resist love. The lovers are constantly obsessed with each other. They credit the object of their affection with godlike qualities, and go through religious rituals of worship and devotion. They exchange talismans—a ring, a scarf, or some meaningful trifle. A medieval lady gave her knight a piece of clothing or jewelry to protect him, a kind of love charm. Lovers still exchange such tokens today, and imbue them with similar power. During the Middle Ages, lovers were secretive, often so that the woman's husband wouldn't discover her infidelity. In Elizabethan times, lovers were still secretive, but then it was to keep the girl's father from preventing their meetings. When Shakespeare's lovers declare their love, they intend to marry. An ordeal keeps them temporarily apart, and during this lonely, dislocated time, they weep and sigh, become forgetful, lose their appetites, moan to their confidants, write elegant, heartfelt love letters, lie awake all night. The play ends with marriage' and/or death. These are the only choices open to Shakespearean lovers, because they can only love one person, without whom life seems worthless. In Shakespeare's plays, the characters all practice courtly love, but there is one important difference: instead of craving seduction, they crave marriage. Their families might be mad as hell, go to war over it, or send the girl off to a nunnery. But the lovers don't need their parents' legal permission to marry. When love conquers all, it isn't through subterfuge or blackmail or because of pregnancy, but because the parents understand the sincerity of the couple's love.

As *Romeo and Juliet* unfolds, the main characters make it clear that there are many forms of love. T.J.B. Spencer sums this up in his commentary to the Penguin edition:

> There is Juliet's—both before and after she has fallen in love; Romeo's—both while he thinks he is in love with Rosaline, and after his passion has been truly aroused by Juliet; Mercutio's—his brilliant intelligence seems to make ridiculous an all-absorbing and exclusive passion based upon sex; Friar Laurence's—for him love is an accompaniment of life, reprehensible if violent or unsanctified by religion; Father Capulet's—for him it is something to be decided by a prudent father for his heiress-daughter; Lady Capulet's—for her it is a matter of worldly wisdom (she herself is not yet thirty and has a husband who gave up dancing thirty years ago); and the Nurse's—for her, love is something natural and sometimes lasting, connected with pleasure and pregnancy, part of the round of interests in a woman's life.

The teenagers of *Romeo and Juliet* are hotheads, or hot loins, who decide that they are mortally in love and must marry immediately, though they haven't exchanged a hundred words. "Give me my Romeo," Juliet demands, with an innocence blunt and trusting. But even she fears the speed at which they're moving:

> It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden;
> Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be
> Ere one can say it lightens.

The use of lightning and gunpowder images throughout the play keeps reminding us how combustible the situation is, how incandescent their love, and how life itself burns like a brief, gorgeous spark in the night. Their moonlit balcony scene, full of tenderness and yearning, with some of the most beautiful phrasing ever written, shows them sighing for love under the moon and stars, vibrantly alive in a world of glitter and shadow. After such intimacy under the covers of night, their secret marriage is certain. Then comes the impossibility of living without one another. After many obstacles, a set of dire confusions leads the lovers to commit suicide. Ironically, the horror of their deaths serves to reconcile the feuding families. Thus love is portrayed as an emissary force that can travel between foes and conduct its own arbitration. On the most basic level, this is biologically true, however one expresses it, as *competing organisms join forces for mutual benefit,* or *love can make bedfellows of enemies.* Why does the world seem unlivable without the loved one? Why does a teenager abandon hope of ever loving or being loved again in the entirety of his or her life?