The Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet

Romeo and Juliet can be dated any time after 1562 (the publication of Arthur Brooke’s poem The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet) and before 1597 when Romeo and Juliet appeared in print.

**Publication Date**

This play was first published by John Danter in 1597 (without any corresponding entry in the Stationers’ Register until 1607):

[Q1 1597] An Excellent Conceited Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet, As it hath been often (with great applause) plaid publiquely, by the right Honourable the L. of Hunsdon his Servants.

The author was not named. Q1 has previously been referred to as a ‘bad quarto’, and probably a “memorial reconstruction” which had been “pirated for publication” (Spencer). The modern approach (e.g. Erne) is to see Q1, in common with other so-called ‘bad quartos’, as a shorter original performance version.1

The play was re-published two years later by Thomas Creed:

[Q2 1599] The Most Excellent and lamentable Tragedie of Romeo and Iuliet. Newly corrected, augmented and amended: As it hath bene sundry times publiquely acted by the right Honourable the Lord Chamberlaine his Servants.

Q2, often referred to as a ‘good quarto’, has about 700 more lines. It is said to have been based on Shakespeare’s foul papers, apparently collating passages from Q1. The stage direction at 4.5.102 states “Enter Will Kemp”, rather than Q1’s “Enter Peter” perhaps showing the influence of a copy belonging to Shakespeare’s company.2 Erne argues against the label of ‘bad quarto’, noting that “The first quarto has high-paced action, fuller stage directions than the second quarto, and fascinating alternatives to the famous speeches in the longer version.”

The play was registered to Nicholas Ling in the Stationers’ Register in 1607 and shortly afterwards transferred to John Smethwicke:

[SR 1607] 22 Januarij Master Linge Entred for his copies by direccon of A Court and with consent of Master Bvrby under his handwrytinge these .iij copies viz. Romeo and Juliett. [SR 1607] 19 November John Smythick. Entred for his copies vnder thandes of the wardens, these bookes followinge Whiche dyd belonge to Nicholas Lynge viz . . . 10 Romeo and Juliett . . .

The play appeared twice more in Quarto before the First Folio (F1) in 1623:

[Q3 1609] The Most Excellent and lamentable Tragedie of Romeo and Iuliet. As it hath bene sundry times publiquely Acted by the Kings Maiesties Servants at the Globe. Newly corrected, augmented and amended:

[Q4 no date] The Most Excellent and lamentable Tragedie of Romeo and Iuliet. As it hath bene sundry times publiquely Acted by the Kings Maiesties Servants at the Globe. Written by W Shake-speare. Newly corrected, augmented and amended:

Some copies of Q4 do not have ‘Written by W Shake-speare’ on the title page. Q3, Q4 and F1 derive from Q2. Another quarto, Q5, was published in 1637 but has no independent status.
Title page to the anonymous first quarto of *Romeo and Juliet*, 1597.
By permission of Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, shelfmark Arch. G d.44 (2), title page.

**Attribution**

Meres (1598) lists *Romeo and Juliet* among Shakespeare’s tragedies. Weever’s sonnet, usually dated 1599 but possibly earlier, mentions Romeo among other protagonists of Shakespeare.³ The printed text of *Romeo & Juliet*, however, remains anonymous until Q4, which is usually dated 1622.

**Performance Date**

There are no surviving records of actual performances of *Romeo and Juliet* before 1660. According to the title pages of Q1 and Q2, the play was performed by the Lord Hunsden’s Servants. This is usually interpreted as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, sponsored by Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, who was Lord Chamberlain from 1585 to 1596 (Chambers ES ii 192–208). However, the reference is to Lord Hunsdon’s Servants, and not the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Since
Henry Hunsden had intermittently maintained a company of players from 1564, the reference may well be to pre-1594 performances, before he became patron of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, and possibly before 1586, when the Lord Chamberlain’s Men are first mentioned. Alternatively, it could refer to the short period after Henry’s death in 1596, and the appointment of his son George as Lord Chamberlain on 17 March 1597, which would coincide with the publication of Q1. From the title pages of Q3 and Q4, we note that the play was later performed by the King’s Men (i.e. after 1603).4

Sources

Bullough cites “the main and perhaps sole source” of Romeo and Juliet as Arthur Brooke’s poem The Tragicall Histoure of Romeus and Juliet (1562). This poem was a loose translation of Boaistuau’s French version of the story (published in Belleforest’s 1559 Histoires Tragiques). The French version was derived from Bandello’s Novelle, (published in 1554, containing 214 stories). Shakespeare does not seem to have consulted the French or Italian versions for Romeo and Juliet (but he probably did for Much Ado). In 1567, another version of the story was published in English; William Painter’s Palace of Pleasure may have supplied a few small details, e.g. Juliet’s 42-hour sleep. But as the outline story was widely told, this detail may have been gleaned from elsewhere. There are some small similarities with Daniel’s Complaint of Rosamund (1592) and Eliot’s Ortho-Epia (1593). Since these are small in number, the direction of influence is by no means established.

Orthodox Date – Internal Evidence

There is no evidence for the date of composition. The date of 1596 has been proposed to coincide with the assumed dates of composition of Love’s Labour’s Lost, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and Richard II, which Chambers refers to as “Shakespeare’s lyrical period”. Wells & Taylor prefer 1595, noting that “if Romeo is the last of the lyrical plays, the second half of 1596 is already rather crowded.” While these plays share similarities, it is possible that Shakespeare drafted, re-worked and revised them at different times of his life. Wiggins dates the composition of Romeo & Juliet to 1595 shortly before a performance in 1595 was recorded. He believes that Q1 (1597) was unauthorized, to be replaced by an authorized Quarto in 1599 (III: 268–74).

Orthodox Date – External Evidence

It has been suggested that the Nurse’s mention of the earthquake (at 1.3.25) refers to an event in England on 6 April 1580. If so, her statement “‘Tis since the earthquake now eleven years” would give a date of composition c. 1591. The 1580 earthquake occurred during performances at both the Theatre and the Curtain. There were pamphlets on the subject by Thomas Churchyard and Richard Tarleton, as well as accounts by Arthur Golding and Anthony Munday.5 Chambers dismissed this consideration, followed by almost all commentators except Baldwin, as being too early for Shakespeare to have sufficiently developed his style by this point. There was another earthquake in France in 1584, which has been taken by some to suggest a date of 1595.

The poet, John Weever, referred to “Romeo, Richard: more whose names I know not” in his sonnet, which has usually been dated to 1599 but might (according to Chambers) have been as early as 1595.6 It has been suggested that Richard Burbage played Romeo with the boy actor Robert Goffe as Juliet at the Theatre.

Oxfordian Date

Oxfordians generally agree that Oxford wrote Romeo and Juliet soon after 1581-2, when he was involved in a series of street brawls with Thomas Knyvet, following his affair with Anne Vavasour.7 This coincides with the eleventh anniversary of the serious earthquake which hit Verona in 1570 and destroyed the town of Ferrara. Steve Sohmer concludes that the Nurse was referring to the 1570 earthquake. Sohmer has studied the Nurse’s Speech at 1.iii.18–50 and reviewed the various references to time.8 He shows that the play was set in 1582 when the Gregorian Calendar was taking over from the Julian. Although he does not mention Oxford, his conclusion might be taken to suggest a composition date in the 1580s. Oxford would have seen the devastation for himself when he visited Italy in 1575–6. By comparison, the London earthquake of 1580 was no more than a
tremor, although the writers who gave an account (Churchyard, Tarleton and especially Munday) were all theatre practitioners known to Oxford. A further coincidence is that Oxford complained about his letters having been delayed by plague in Italy; this recalls the similar delay to Friar Laurence’s letter in Romeo and Juliet.

Conclusion

Romeo and Juliet can be dated any time after 1562 (the publication of Arthur Brooke’s poem The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet) and before 1597, when Romeo and Juliet appeared in print.

Notes

1. Chambers, WS, 341–47 prefers the theory of a pirated copy derived from a memorial reconstruction, giving examples of many transpositions of phrases. He accepts that the play might have been shortened for performance (Q1 has 2,232 lines; F1 has 3,007) or that Shakespeare might have emended his own play. Lukas Erne in The First Quarto of Romeo and Juliet (2007) surveys the idea of ‘bad quartos’ and compares the versions of the play.

2. Chambers shows close resemblances between Q1 and Q2 in spelling, punctuation, and the use of capitals and italics. Levenson (2000: 111) has reviewed the relationship between Q1 and Q2.


4. For Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, see Chambers, ES, II, 191-194.


7. For Oxford’s “lethal quarrel” with Knyvet, see Nelson, 280–7.


Other Works Cited


Chambers, E. K., Elizabethan Stage, 4 vols, Oxford: Clarendon, 1923


