

*Romeo and Harriet*  
A Study Guide For Actors and Audiences

- 1) The play opens with a parody of the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Like the original, it employs rhymed iambic pentameter. Look up the opening of *Romeo and Juliet* where the Prologue lays out the scene. Try writing your own parody of this speech. Use iambic pentameter and describe two modern feuding groups—fans of rival sports teams, for instance.
- 2) How did the playwright come up with the names of the members of the chorus? In what ways are they appropriate? In what ways are they comically inappropriate?
- 3) In lines 1–22 of page 4, the Prologue points out that William Shakespeare would vary his use of iambic pentameter. Look up the famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy spoken by Hamlet (Act III, sc. i) and note the variations Shakespeare uses on this standard poetic rhythm.
- 4) In line 7, page 6, Risotto lists three words that were used in Shakespeare's time but have fallen out of use—marry, forsooth, and methinks. What did these words mean in Shakespeare's time (yes, “marry” had a meaning besides “wed”)?
- 5) A parody is always funnier (and makes more sense) when the audience is familiar with the original. The playwright uses the device of a TV game show to quickly summarize the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. On what aspects of the tragedy does this summary concentrate? What parts of the story are omitted from the summary?
- 6) On page 9 we learn about an old theatre superstition—that you should never say “Macbeth” in a theatre. Do a little research and see if you can find out about some of the misfortunes that have accompanied productions of Shakespeare's “Scottish play.”
- 7) The first time we hear from Nick and Vinnie is on page 10. What can we gather about their characters based on this brief exchange?
- 8) On page 12, line 28 Mercutio asks, “Do you clap your hands at me, sir?” This is a direct parody of Abraham's line in the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet*. What does Abraham say there? How are the results of this line in the original similar to the results in the parody? How do they differ?
- 9) Why is the person who sells merchandise to the Capulet's called Shylock? In what small way is he like another Shylock?
- 10) There are a few places in the script where characters speak exact quotes from *Romeo and Juliet*. How are these original lines used to create comic effects in this modern version of the play (see for instance 18.32, 27.9)?

11) Romeo and Juliet first address each other in a famous sonnet. Romeo and Winifred first address each other in a lame sonnet. From these two sonnets, can you discover the rhyme scheme Shakespeare used in his sonnets? Can you write one of your own using the same rhyme scheme and taking the form of a conversation between two characters?

12) What devices does the playwright use to teach the audience about Shakespeare and his world?

13) The character of the nurse in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Romeo and Winifred* is a comic character. In what ways are these characters similar? How do they differ?

14) It could be said that a tragedy is just a comedy that doesn't work out very well. *Romeo and Juliet* might have been a comedy, but for some missed messages near the end of the play. Think about the narrow line that separates tragedy from comedy. How does the playwright use the plotline of a tragedy (*Romeo and Juliet*) and yet write a comedy (*Romeo and Winifred*)?

#### WORDPLAY

Like Shakespeare in his comedies, the playwright uses various forms of wordplay in *Romeo and Winifred*. Playing with the sounds and meanings of words is one of the oldest forms of comedy. Consider three lines (9–11) from page 2. The first (“I shall make a third”) is a paraphrase of a line Dr. Caius speaks in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (see if you can find the original—it’s much ruder since Shakespeare is making fun of the doctor’s French accent). The second is a pun—a play on the homophones “forth” and “fourth.” The third uses, out of context, a familiar phrase in America, “taking the fifth”—i.e. refusing to offer testimony under the protection granted by the Fifth Amendment. In three lines we find an allusion, a pun, and an out of context quotation—three types of wordplay.

15) At several places in the play, the playwright inserts—sometimes subtly, but usually not—the titles of other Shakespeare plays. How many of these can you find?

16) Another form of wordplay used by the playwright is a device where a character mistakes the meaning of a word or phrase, only to be corrected. Look through the script for instances of this form of wordplay (one example appears on page 25.23).

17) The playwright uses names as a device for wordplay at several points in the play. Consider how names and mistaken names can be a form of wordplay. See, for instance, Winifred’s discussion of Romeo’s name on p. 28 (and the name of her cat) and the discussion of the Friar’s name on p. 32–33.

18) How many other types of wordplay can you find in the script? Think about the use you make of wordplay in everyday life. Though we think of language as something we use to communicate thoughts and ideas, we often use it just for play—telling jokes, making puns, trading witty comments, and so on.