Autobiographical roots of shakespeare's romeo and juliet

Literature, British Literature

The notion that Romeo and Juliet came to Shakespeare through the events of his life is more than just a marvelous joke. It is plausible because that is how we think of fiction in the post-Romantic world. Writing as autobiography is very dominantly the mode of creation with which we are familiar. Shakespeare's searing drama may be the world's most widely known story of tragic love, but it certainly wasn't the first. Orpheus and Eurydice. Tristan and Isolde. Lancelot and Guinevere. There is no shortage of tales of young love thwarted by fatal misunderstandings or plain bad luck. But like all wondering legends his too has deep roots. I will show how no idea is formed in a vacuum and everything comes from somewhere else.

Scholars trace elements of Romeo and Juliet as far back as ancient Rome, to Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe, a bittersweet tale of feuding families, forbidden love, and a secret meeting at a tomb gone terribly wrong. Writing a century or two after Ovid, Xenophon of Ephesus further anticipates Shakespeare with the melodramatic An Ephesian Tale. Even more direct antecedents to Shakespeare's play turn up in a number of 15th and 16th century Italian stories. Masuccio Salernitano surely knew of Xenophon's tale before writing the 33rd story of his popular 1476 Cinquante Novelle, in which a bribed friar secretly weds the hapless Sienese lovers Mariotto and Giannozza.

A half a century later, writer Luigi da Porto responded to Salernitano with Historia Novellamente Ritrovata di Due Nobili Amanti, published posthumously in 1530. He transported the story from Siena to Verona, set it during the brief reign of the Veronese ruler Bartolomeo della Scala, and introduced the names of the rival Montecchi and Cappelletti families. The

well read da Porto claimed he heard his version of the story from one of his bowman, Pellegrino of Verona, and never directly acknowledged that these names first appeared together in Canto VI of Dante's Purgatory. Whatever his source, da Porto established both the story's basic shape and many of the characters that appear approximately 67 years later in Shakespeare's play. Da Porto's novella was so popular that before long multiple versions followed. A significant interpretation came from Matteo Bandello.

A monk who preferred the luxuries of court to the austerity of the religious order, he travelled extensively around Italy before moving to France, where he assumed the post of Bishop of Aven and wrote many stories. Bandello echoed da Porto to a large extent, though among other changes he played up the families' antagonism and introduced the character of the nurse. While da Porto's story achieved great popularity in his native Italy, it was Frenchman Pierre Boaistuau's translation of Bandello in 1559 that launched the tale on its journey across the continent to England. But before Romeo and Juliet was even a twinkle in Shakespeare's eye, another Englishman had his turn.

In 1562, Arthur Brooke relied heavily on Boaistuau for his Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet, a sprawling 3020 line poem. Though Brooke's narrative for the most part keeps to Boaistuau's, like his predecessors he felt compelled to put his own imprint on the tale. He granted more weight to the star-crossed aspect of the lovers' story, reduced Juliet's age by two years from 18 to 16, gave greater importance to the nurse, and increased the duration of key incidents. Some of the few small changes that Shakespeare

did make including reducing her age even more, further enhancing the nurses pivotal role, and compressing Brooke's leisurely unfolding of a events into a tumultuous few days.

We can see that da Porto supplied the core themes and Brooke the structure. All the controversy surrounding the legends evolution aside, what's incontestable is that, through the eloquence and urgency of his language, Shakespeare transformed a colourful story into the tour de force we know as Romeo and Juliet.