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The Durability of Adaptation: Fate and Fortune in Romeo and Juliet

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2015
Claremont Colleges Library
Undergraduate Research Award

Junior Award Winner
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Reflective Essay

Stephanie Steinbrecher
Scripps College
Claremont Colleges Library Undergraduate Research Award
30 March 2015

Reflective Essay

In developing a research project for Professor Marissa Nicosia's Elizabethan Shakespeare course, I focused on formulating an interpretive question that enabled me to utilize items from the Honnold-Mudd Library Special Collections. From my time as a special collections associate at Denison Library, I have experienced the importance of directly analyzing primary sources, particularly in terms of literature review; however, I did not have the chance to work with primary sources for any past courses. So when Professor Nicosia introduced the opportunity to construct a final project utilizing texts of Shakespeare's works in Denison and Honnold-Mudd Special Collections, I elected to delve into a new kind of research that exceeded literary analysis drawn from scholastic materials and secondary sources. The final paper I am submitting to the Claremont Colleges Library Undergraduate Research Award is titled "The Durability of Adaptation: Fate and Fortune in *Romeo and Juliet*" and reflects the product of my research.

One essential quality of Shakespeare's plays is that they are deeply ingrained in literary, cultural, and dramatic contexts, particularly in the form of performance adaptations. While the plot is widely known, the text of *Romeo and Juliet* itself has never been fixed, as the earliest folio and quarto editions (some of which are housed in Honnold-Mudd Special Collections) demonstrate. This particular element of Shakespearean dramas inspired me to look into the nuances between editions and adaptations, and how both subtle and overt changes to the plotline and text of *Romeo and Juliet* particularly have evolved the content of the play over time. Professor Nicosia scheduled meetings between librarian staff at Honnold-Mudd and Denison to review Shakespeare works housed in each special collections archive with my class. From this preliminary overview of the materials available in the libraries, I was inspired to do additional research on the library catalog and special collections catalogue about various editions and adaptations of the drama. I was amazed by the potential opportunities for further research opened to me by the texts in the collections—choosing which adaptations to compare with the modern Folger edition that I used for my class and the early quartos was not easy. I opted to look

at a performance adaptation from Honnold-Mudd Special Collections, which took significant liberties with the text of the quartos. I decided on this text specifically because it highlights how non-static dramas, particularly Shakespeare's works, serve as a unique literary medium. They are flexible, as there is no absolute authoritative source on the "original" play text. Nuances have the potential to change the content of the play, as acknowledged by my interpretive comparison and analysis. Another shade of interpretation, in addition to the textual resources, is the fact that dramas are meant for performance—we cannot know how plays were performed historically, even with different textual adaptations we might have, nor can we know how the acting might change our conceptions of what constitutes thematic and plot-driven frameworks of an adaptation. This highlights an important quality of drama, in terms of literary analysis: as a genre, it is incredibly malleable. This drove my research in evaluating different editions and performance adaptations of the play over time.

I settled my project on focusing on the themes introduced by the Prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* as well as the barefaced elimination of the character of Rosaline in the Tonson and Draper mid-eighteenth century adaptation. This provided a sufficient case study for my argument about comparing the malleability of dramatic texts like *Romeo and Juliet*, and the differences that such changes cast on the work as a whole. I met with Gale Burrow a few times to review the materials in Honnold-Mudd Special Collections, utilizing her knowledge of the available folio and quartos and the performance adaptations to supplement my understanding about chronology of publishing and the changes in approaches to Shakespeare's works that have developed over time. I also met with Professor Nicosia early in the research part of my project to finalize a salient research question. Going through the pages and scenes in each edition was grueling work, but it enabled me to find some fascinating differences, some of which were minute, that challenged me to think about the implications different versions had for their respective works holistically. I used secondary sources from the online journal resources in the library database in addition to materials that Professor Nicosia provided to our class from publications like the *Shakespeare Quarterly*.

Because Shakespeare the dramatist was so prolific and the literature emerging from Shakespeare studies is so abundant, the greatest research challenge was deciding what to incorporate from the wealth of resources available, given the scope of this project. Additionally,

finding original ways to talk about themes, motifs, characters, etc. in Shakespeare plays is increasingly complicated, as more people continue to contribute to the scholastic conversation around Shakespeare's body of work. From conducting research for this project, I learned how to do physical research in addition to basing my questions, analysis, and arguments on secondary sources. I also learned the importance of creating a research question that is appropriately answerable within the parameters of the project's scope—had I chosen more than the factors I selected to analyze between different versions of *Romeo and Juliet* for this paper, for example, going into appropriate depth of analysis would have been impossible. Thirdly, this project gave me the opportunity to rely on my own interpretive skills rather than basing my research on previous scholarship. In this sense, I felt that my work was more original than it would have been if I had chosen a project that did not require my attention to primary source material in Special Collections. This experience enabled me to extend my research skills into a new domain and to participate in the kind of analytic work that Shakespeare scholars and other academics contribute to the broader literary community.

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Undergraduate Research Award

Junior Award Winner

Stephanie Steinbrecher
Scripps College

Research Project

“The Durability of Adaptation:
Fate and Fortune in Romeo and Juliet”

Stephanie Steinbrecher

English 123A: Elizabethan Shakespeare

Final Project

12 December 2014

The Durability of Adaptation: Fate and Fortune in *Romeo and Juliet*

Critics, performance adapters and screenwriters, historians, actors, and interpreters of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* have found endless shades of difference in the play over time. Nuance is where its enduring appeal ultimately lies. As with many of Shakespeare's works, *Romeo and Juliet* is a porous text; its flexibility in textual veracity, plot and character formulation, and performance adaptation allow for its interpretation in many different contexts. The play's categorization as a Shakespearean tragedy invites a series of questions that critics have debated and explored. Who is the tragic hero? The antagonist? Where in the tragic plot does the young lovers' relationship stand in relation to their identities as individuals, or against the backdrop of the social structures of Verona society? What roles do choice and destiny play in Romeo's, Juliet's, and Verona's fate? Over 400 years of drama in performance has seen these questions answered in innumerable different ways.

This paper takes particular interest in this final question relating to the role of fate for the "pair of star-crossed lovers" in adaptation (Prologue, 6). The changes that a 1752 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* makes to the text of the early Quarto and Folio editions affect the extent to which destiny operates in this play. The absence of the Prologue in this interpretation rewrites the rhetorical structure of fate as an element that shapes the action of the plot. Additionally, in removing the character Rosaline, this version of the play alters the access that the titular characters have to individual agency—and, therefore, their fate—by disrupting the dynamic of

their personalities and the foundation of their relationship. The function of preordained, inevitable fate—a major theme recognized in modern scholarship on *Romeo and Juliet*—is far less present in the textual organization and narrative arc of this eighteenth-century adaptation than in the texts from the early Quartos (the modern Folger Shakespeare Library 2011 edition used in this paper is based largely on Quarto 2) and Folios. Intentional exclusion of the Prologue and the character Rosaline in this 1752 edition reinforces the significance of these components on the thematic influence of fate throughout *Romeo and Juliet*.

Sans stars divine and Rosaline

A pamphlet containing the eighteenth-century textual version of *Romeo and Juliet* examined in this paper is housed in Honnold-Mudd Library Special Collections. This adaptation, printed in 1752 for J. and R. Tonson and S. Draper, describes itself on its title page as being “With Alterations, and an additional Scene: As it is Performed at the *Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane*” (Figure 1). The 14-line Prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* does not exist in the Second Folio—the text begins immediately with Sampson and Gregory in Act 1 (Figure 2). The Tonson and Draper 1752 textual adaptation of the play also deletes the Prologue in its adaptation (Figure 3). The Folio’s and the eighteenth-century rendition’s omission signal a blatant departure from the text of the early Quartos. The First Quarto was published in 1597, the Second Quarto in 1599. Both were published before the First and all subsequent Folios, and both contain versions of the Prologue (Figure 4). Modern adaptations, criticism, and texts, including the Folger edition, generally seem to consider the opening sonnet to be an integral component of the play. The words of the Prologue are firmly etched in the English lexicon; many of the metaphors and images carried throughout the play, including that of the ill-fated star-crossed lovers, are first introduced in these opening 14 lines. Aside from the fact that most modern audiences of *Romeo*

and Juliet would likely notice if the Prologue was missing from a contemporary performance or edition, how does its exclusion alter the structural and thematic elements that follow in the play's text? What, effectively, is the purpose of the Prologue?

The second major change that the 1752 altered textual version of the play admits is the total erasure of Rosaline as a character; this is an idiosyncratic interpretation and imposed difference when compared to the Quarto and Folio texts of *Romeo and Juliet*. The producers of this textual version of the performance even give their rationale for removing Rosaline:

When this play was reviv'd two winters ago, it was generally thought, that the sudden change of Romeo's love from Rosaline to Juliet was a blemish in his character, and therefore it is to be hop'd that an alteration in that particular will be excus'd; the only merit that is claim'd from it is, that it is done with as little injury to the original as possible. (Figure 5)

The Tonson and Draper adaptation glosses over the implications of changing a perceived “blemish” in a representation of a playwright's work while still attributing it to them, simultaneously claiming that “the alterations in the following play are few” (Figure 5). However, it does acknowledge that it has taken liberties with existing print editions of the play. To an extent, every interpretation and iteration of *Romeo and Juliet* since it was first published in the late-sixteenth century has made certain performance calls, rendering countless distinctive versions. It is here, in the fluidity and idiosyncrasy of the choice involved in reproduction, that works of drama have the ability to enjoy a kind of textual pliability not afforded to other genres of literature. Margaret Jane Kidnie considers the variety in forms of Shakespeare's works, given his plays' textual, adaptation, and likely performance differences: “[We might] examine how an artwork functions in practice and in history, not as an object but as a cultural process... Whether one is speaking of *Hamlet* or the *Mona Lisa*, the work, then, is less a thing or object, than it is an unbound diachronic series of events” (Kidnie 102). While there may be no appropriate way to

consider one textual version of Shakespeare's—or other dramatists'—works as having an ultimate authoritative veracity, different interpretations leave room for comparison up and against what have become the most well known and widely spread textual versions of the plays, such as the Folger edition compiled primarily from the Quartos. Because the producers of this particular eighteenth-century rendering consciously decided to change Romeo's character by eliminating the Rosaline plotline, they also upended other delicate dynamics at work in Shakespeare's play. Rather than transferring his all-consuming love from one woman (Rosaline) to another (Juliet), Romeo loves Juliet from the beginning. This sets the namesake characters' personalities—and their shared relationship—on a different footing than the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century versions of the narrative, which introduce Romeo as lovesick for Rosaline.

While the changes applied in the 1752 performance text are attributed to improving Romeo's character and eliminating other “objections,” they unduly affect the status quo within the world of the play; indeed, this does cause “injury to”—or at least departure from—“the original,” as far as thematic arcs operate. Through the elimination of the Prologue and the Rosaline plotline, the 1752 adaptation reveals how these two components of *Romeo and Juliet* function into the structural and thematic “star-crossed” fate element of the play. This emerges particularly when juxtaposing the 1752 differences with the widely read Quarto-adapted modern editions, like the Folger version, used in this paper.

The critical function of the Prologue

The Prologue, a Shakespearean sonnet, is vital to the narrative of fate in *Romeo and Juliet*. It functions as such by spelling out exactly what is going to happen in the play that follows, but also by proposing that the consequences of the young love are inevitable through language that continues throughout the play. It serves as an important introduction to the action

in Verona, just as it sets up major tonal and metaphorical tropes that pervade the rest of the play: “through many references to fate, Shakespeare wished to create a feeling of inevitability, of a mysterious force stronger than individuals shaping their courses even against their will and culminating in the lovers’ deaths” (Kahn 17). Structurally, as the entry point into the text of *Romeo and Juliet*, its placement heightens the theme of preordained, unavoidable fate. While suggesting that the young lovers, as victims of fate, are destined to fall in love and die in order to establish peace between their feuding households, the Prologue also demonstrates the same effect rhetorically. Through form and content, the Prologue foretells what the play is about, promising its certain outcome from the very beginning.

The very existence of the Prologue—spoken to the audience by the chorus—establishes the play as heavily entrenched in fortune. The structure of the sonnet operates ostensibly in the recognizable poetic form, which adds some weight to the Prologue’s relevance for audiences familiar with this literary convention:

Romeo and Juliet opens with a Petrarchan inheritance in the reliquary of the Prologue's English sonnet, an inheritance that endures structurally but endures emptied of its traditional lyric treasures—the lovesick persona, dense metaphor, emotional extremity, song itself: all these have been supplanted by public narrative. "Two households," not "two lovers," opens the poem; "story" rather than lyric is the genre to be dramatized... No longer a poetic end in itself, the sonnet serves as a means to a dramatic issue. Some Petrarchan verve lingers in the loose and ironic paradox of "civil blood making civil hands unclean" and in the tighter oxymoron "fatal loins," but the closing couplet emphasizes a triumph of the prosaic over the lyrical, bequeathing its tired theatrical appeal in wooden prosody. (Whittier 27-8)

Gayle Whittier finds the Petrarchan language invoked in the Prologue without the typical elements of Petrarch’s lover-speaker and beloved subject to be a ploy in the psychological landscape of the play—she thinks of its structure as Shakespeare’s wink at literary tradition. But, she also acknowledges that the sonnet is “no longer a poetic end in itself,” that it serves not just to express an idea as its own self-contained unit but as a vital “narrative burden” saturated with

meaning for the following play (Whittier 28). Excluding this “means to a dramatic issue” has organizational and thematic ramifications. Namely, the absence of this structural element, as in the 1752 adaptation, diminishes how Shakespeare’s formal parallelism works. The play’s cohesion—with a beginning, middle, and end that reflects a full circumnavigation of the fate plot—is ruptured without the Prologue’s formal introduction of that cohesive organizational structure. As in the eighteenth-century performance adaptation, the theme of fate may be implied throughout: the lovers cannot be together due to their families’ mutual animosity. But without the Prologue’s barefaced orchestration of fate’s centrality in the plot, this understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* is somewhat abated. Without the Prologue’s pronouncement and demonstration of fate as a major plot-driving force in this opening text, the play would not so well connect this structural thread of providence that runs throughout the rest of the *Romeo and Juliet* text.

The Prologue’s narrative function, or burden, concerns installing roots of the tragedy of fate. It serves to this end in its form as the omniscient opening of the play, but also in setting a fatal tone in the traces of figurative language it establishes. The first four lines of the sonnet track the uncivil feuding between the Montagues and the Capulets, the distinguished families of Verona to which Romeo and Juliet respectively belong. The second quatrain introduces a new rhyming scheme as well as diction relating to destiny: “From forth the fatal loins of these two foes/ A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life” (Prologue, 5-6). The adjectives “fatal” and “star-crossed” make reference to other-worldly forces at work that dictate the eventual fate of the young lovers, as laid out in the following lines: “Whose misadventured piteous overthrows/ Doth with their death bury their parents’ strife” (Prologue, 7-8). The astrological imagery of “star-crossed lovers” provides one example of how themes and metaphors from this opening sonnet

are carried throughout in the *Romeo and Juliet*. Stars, astrology, and celestial forces imply that control is out of the hands of humans, and fate is left to otherworldly powers to determine. The phrase “star-crossed lovers” supports the argument that fate, introduced as a predominant force propelling the action of the plot, originates in the Prologue. Star-related imagery is dotted throughout dialogue in the play in various instances of foreshadowing. For example, as Romeo anticipates the Capulet’s party while he is still in love with Rosaline, he notes, “I fear too early, for my mind misgives/ Some consequence yet hangs in the stars/ Shall bitterly begin his fearful date” (I.iv.113-4). In the Act II Scene ii “balcony scene,” Romeo and Juliet ironically each refer to stars—either by invoking the beauty or infinitude of the astronomical features—when praising the other. In the final Act, Romeo attributes the misfortune befallen on his love to the stars:

And never from this palace of dim night
 Depart again: here, here will I remain
 With worms that are thy chamber-maids; O, here
 Will I set up my everlasting rest,
 And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
 From this world-wearied flesh! Eyes, look your last. (V.iii.107-12)

Without the structural element of the Prologue dictating that the lovers are “star-crossed,” much of the cosmic imagery invoked in the plot ceases to be as textually interconnected. The 1752 adaptation’s tonal composition is a bit disjointed, in that the references to fate and the stars are never introduced as being unified throughout the text.

Rosaline and the lovers’ individual agency

In Act I of the 1752 adaptation, Mercutio and Benvolio talk about the source of their friend’s lamentations, which Romeo confirms relate to his love. He names his beloved for the first time in this conversation:

Love, heavy lightness! Serious vanity!
 Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms!
 This love feel I: but such my frowned fate,

That there I love where most I ought to hate.
 Dost thou not laugh, my cousin? Oh Juliet, Juliet! (I.iv, pg. 12, Figure 6)

Of course, this is different in the Folger edition that enfolds the Quartos' and Folios' Rosaline plot. Benvolio tries to understand the cause of Romeo's melancholic mood, eventually understanding that lovesickness is tormenting his friend. Benvolio is the first in this version to name Rosaline:

At this same ancient feast of Capulet's
 Sups the fair Rosaline whom thou so loves,
 With all the admirèd beauties of Verona:
 Go thither; and, with unattainted eye,
 Compare her face with some that I shall show,
 And I will make thee think thy swan a crow. (I.iii.89-94)

The 1752 adaptation's editors believe that Romeo's quick change from loving Rosaline to loving Juliet is a character fault, which they then proceed to change. While it is true that omitting Rosaline from the play changes how readers perceive Romeo as a person, this also reveals Rosaline's importance in the function of the way fate operates in the play. Friar Lawrence questions Romeo for dispelling his so-called love for Rosaline so quickly: "Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear,/ So soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies/ Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes" (II.iii.70-2). And yet, he eventually agrees to help the young couple with their doomed intention to be together, even predicting the fateful calamity by famously noting "these violent delights have violent ends" (II.vi.9). Romeo's ardent love for Rosaline, and then for Juliet, can be interpreted as a kind of submission to his own emotions; he seems fickle, like he is guided by passing fancies for women rather than any true devotion and recognition of admiration in another. In this simple understanding of Romeo and his relationship with Juliet, both young lovers are at the whim of forces out of their conscious control.

But the role that Romeo and Juliet have in forging their own destinies might be more complicated than this basic understanding. Fate works differently in the 1752 version, though Romeo still may be interpreted to lack critical decision-making agency. But the conditions from which his relationship with Juliet springs are entirely different in this version—rather than attending the Capulets’ party with the intention, as he is recommended to do by Mercutio and Benvolio, of finding another object of affection to replace his melancholic pining after Juliet (who does not know that Romeo loves her before seeing him at the party), his attendance only confirms what he knew about his beloved. He, in a sense, has already made his choice in love. Paul A. Kottman argues for an interpersonal interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* that directly challenges critical analysis that place the blame for the couple’s ultimate fate with the structures that govern the young lovers’ lives—Verona, their families, social and gender rules of propriety, etc. He claims that “*Romeo and Juliet* is the drama of a struggle for individual freedom and self-realization, and this drama has a tragic structure,” this structure being the one attributed to the fate constructed by the social and societal strictures enveloping the world in which the couple exists (Kottman 5). But Kottman contests this reading, proposing that the relationship Romeo and Juliet forge is more nuanced, as a form of claiming their individual identities:

The tragic core of our self-realization springs not from our personal struggles with external social or natural necessities but from the dawning realization that nothing, not even mortality, separates or individuates us absolutely. This awakening leads Romeo and Juliet to the realization that, if they are to claim their lives as their own, they must somehow actualize their separateness for themselves, through one another. Their love affair is not the story of two individuals whose desire to be together is thwarted by “A greater power than we can contradict” (5.3.153). Rather, it is the story of two individuals *who actively claim* their separate individuality, their own freedom, in the only way that they can—through one another. Their love affair demonstrates that their separateness or individuation is not an imposed, external necessity, but the operation of their freedom and self-realization. To show this, they will stake their lives. (Kottman 5-6)

In this case, Rosaline's presence in Quarto-adapted editions might in fact support the claim that Romeo possesses some agency and control over his actions and emotions—in reading for his exhibition of agency in another, Rosaline might be necessary as Juliet's less-risky precursor, as she is not the daughter of his family's enemy and therefore his partnership with her would not require them to “stake their lives.” But, if as Kottman argues, Romeo is really seeking to assert his own agency through his relationship with a romantic other, Juliet is the only logical choice as she is the ultimate extent to which self-separation is possible. This, ultimately, affects the way in which fate—or individual choice—operates in these renditions of *Romeo and Juliet*.

As the 1752 adaptation of the play reveals, the presence of the Prologue and of the character Rosaline are hinges on which the text may be interpreted to rely on fate as operational mechanisms guiding the plot. The study of modern versions such the Folger Shakespeare Library edition—which are based on older texts such as the early Quartos—in comparison to various adaptations also reveal the limitless possibilities in interpretation and adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* and any other of Shakespeare's works. From performance to text-based variance, these works are not concretized—the themes, motifs, and ways of reading the plot and characters have the potential to vary tremendously because of the flexible nature that the dramatic genre affords.

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Appendix

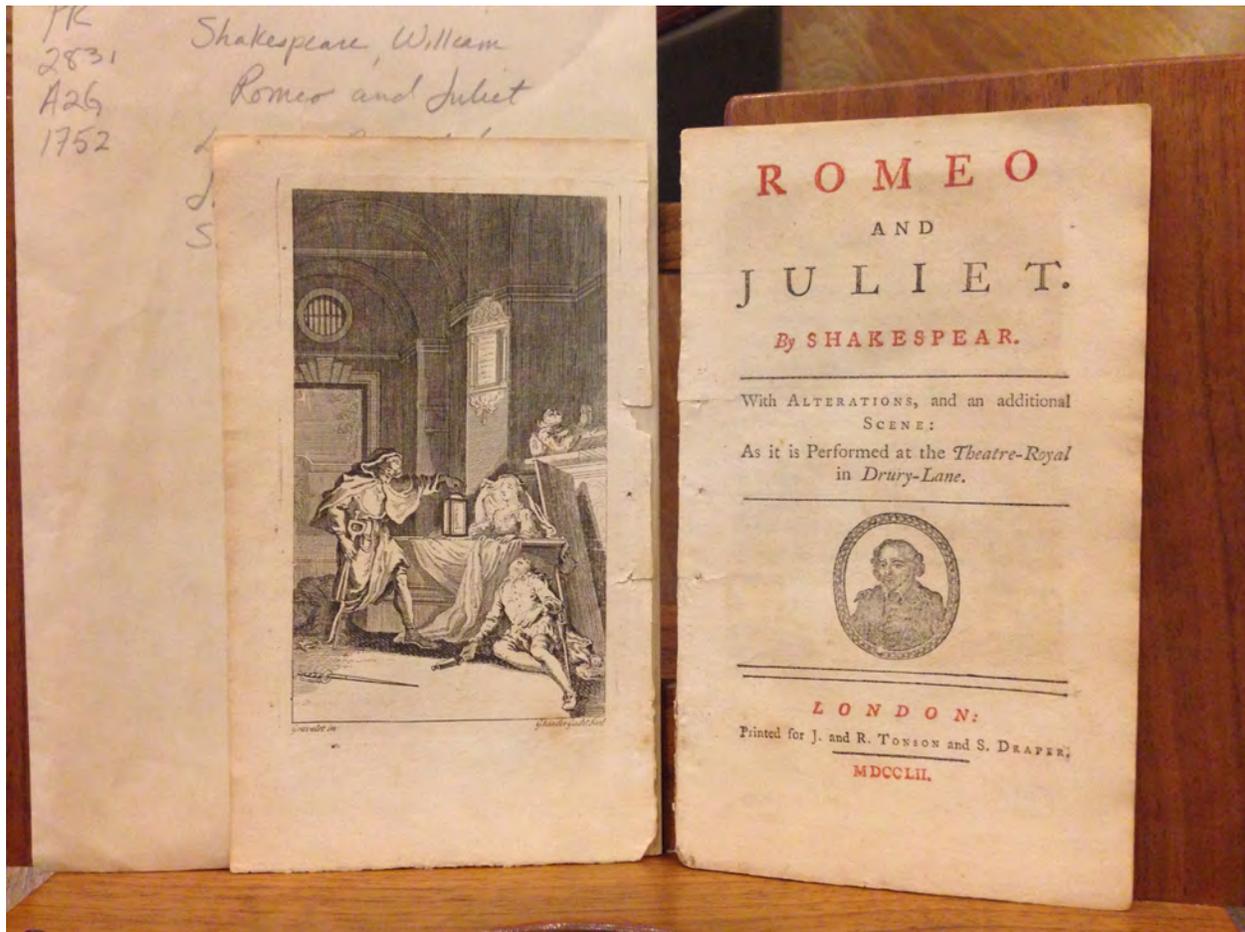


Figure 1: *Romeo and Juliet*, Printed for J. and R. Tonson, S. Draper, 1752. Title page. (Honnold-Mudd Library Special Collections)

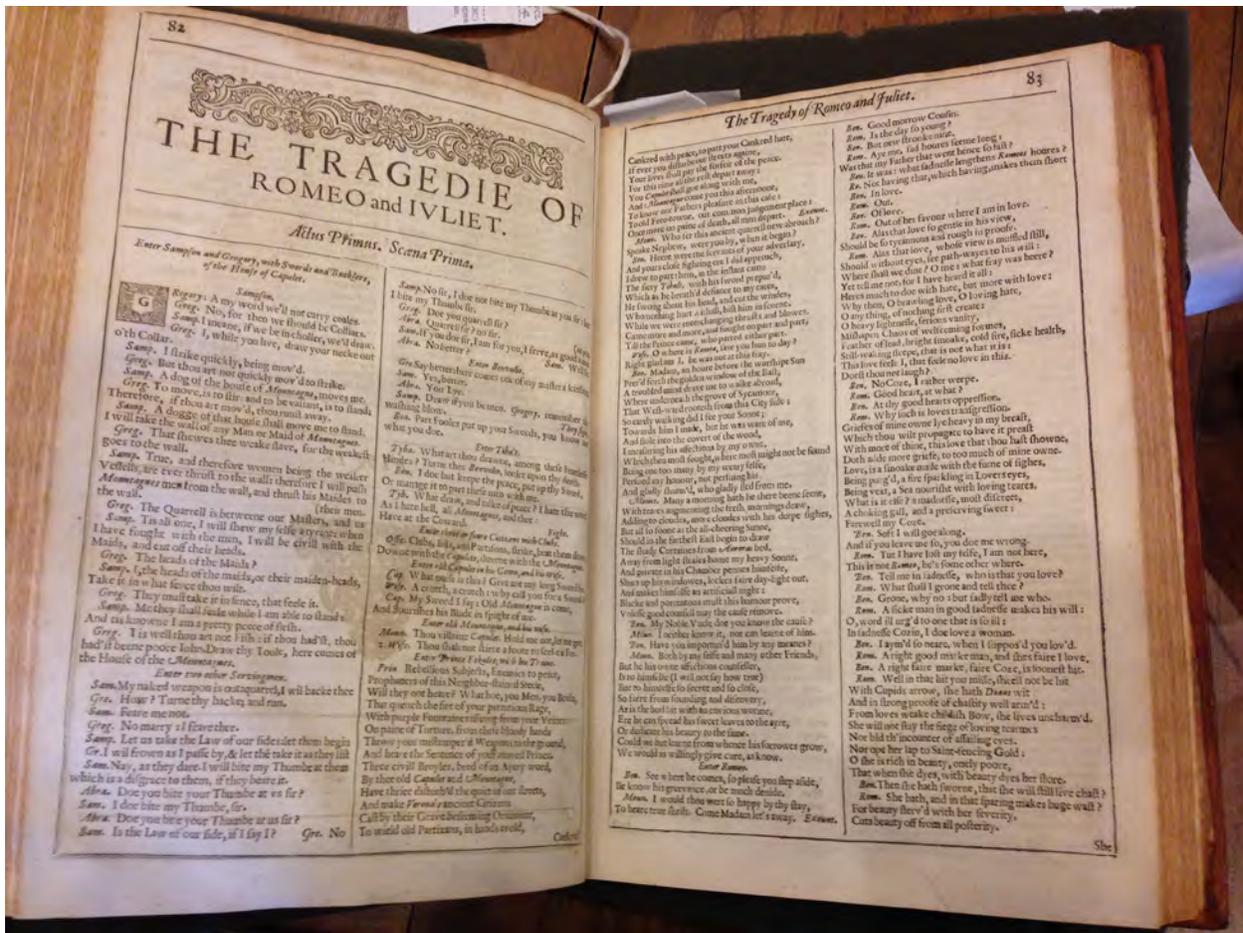


Figure 2: Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies: Published According to the True Originall Copies, The Second Folio, 1632. First page of text. (Honnold-Mudd Library Special Collections)

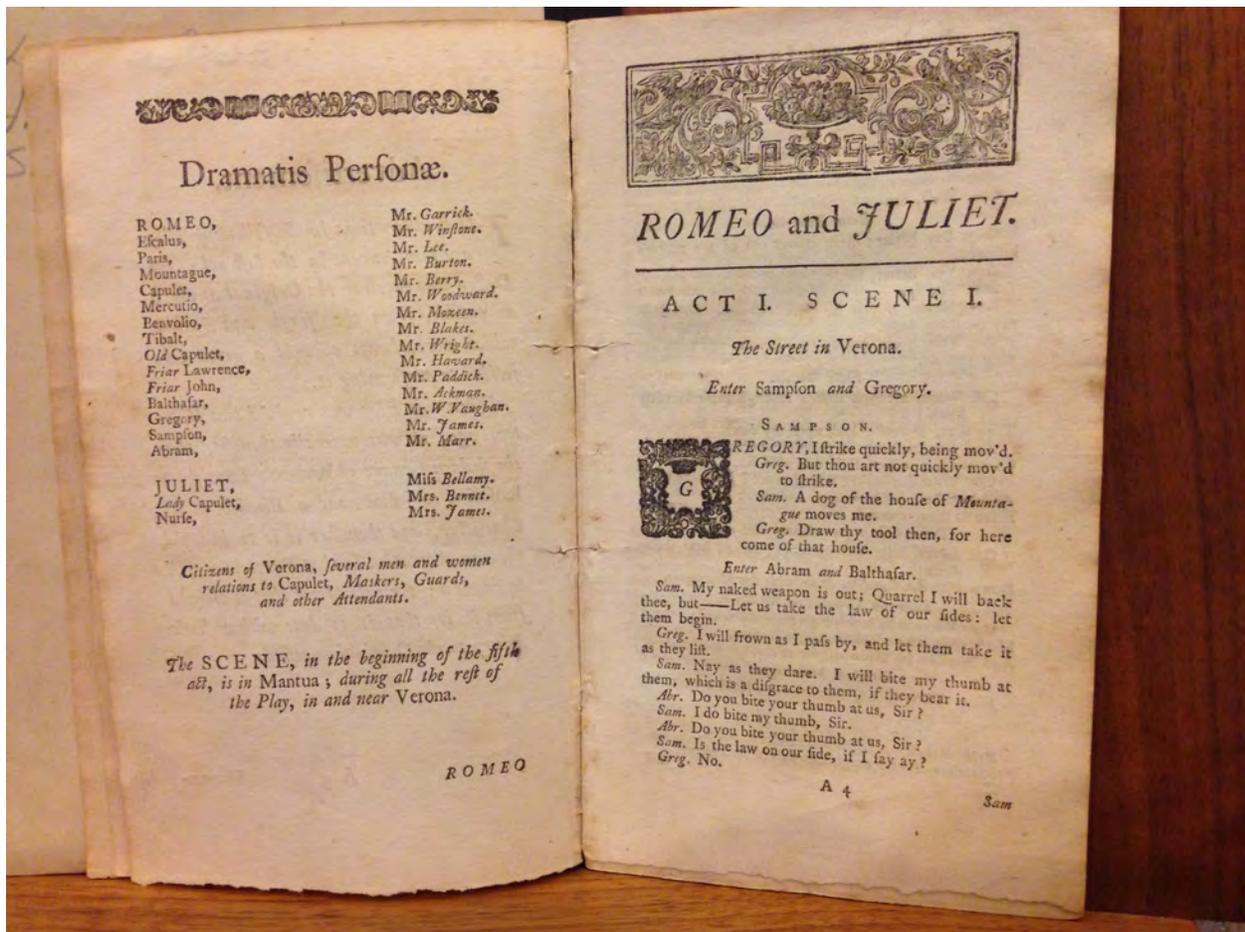


Figure 3: *Romeo and Juliet*, Printed for J. and R. Tonson, S. Draper, 1752. First page of text. (Honnold-Mudd Library Special Collections)

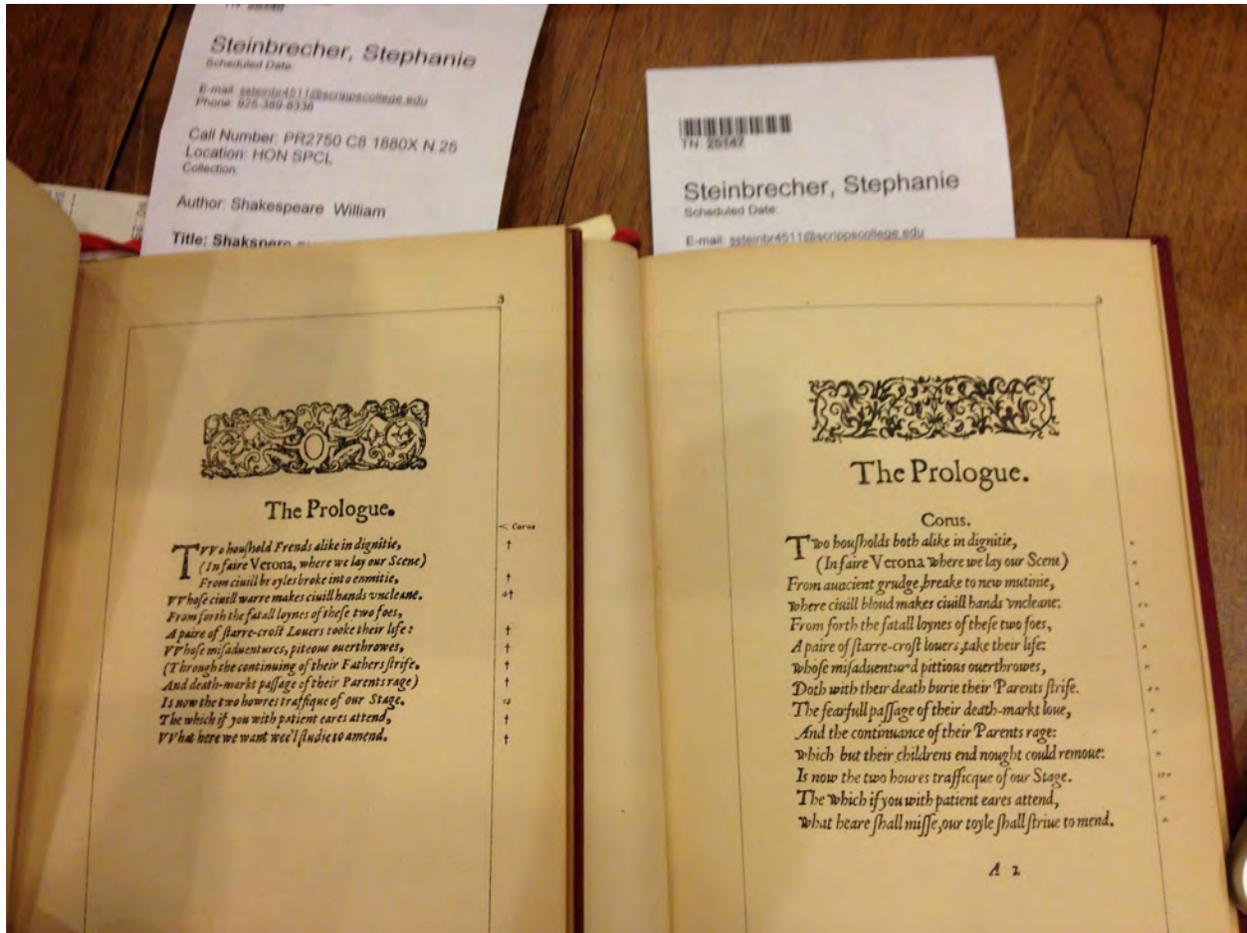


Figure 4: *Romeo and Juliet*, Produced by C. Praetorius, 1886. Facsimiles, The First Quarto (left) and Second Quarto (right).

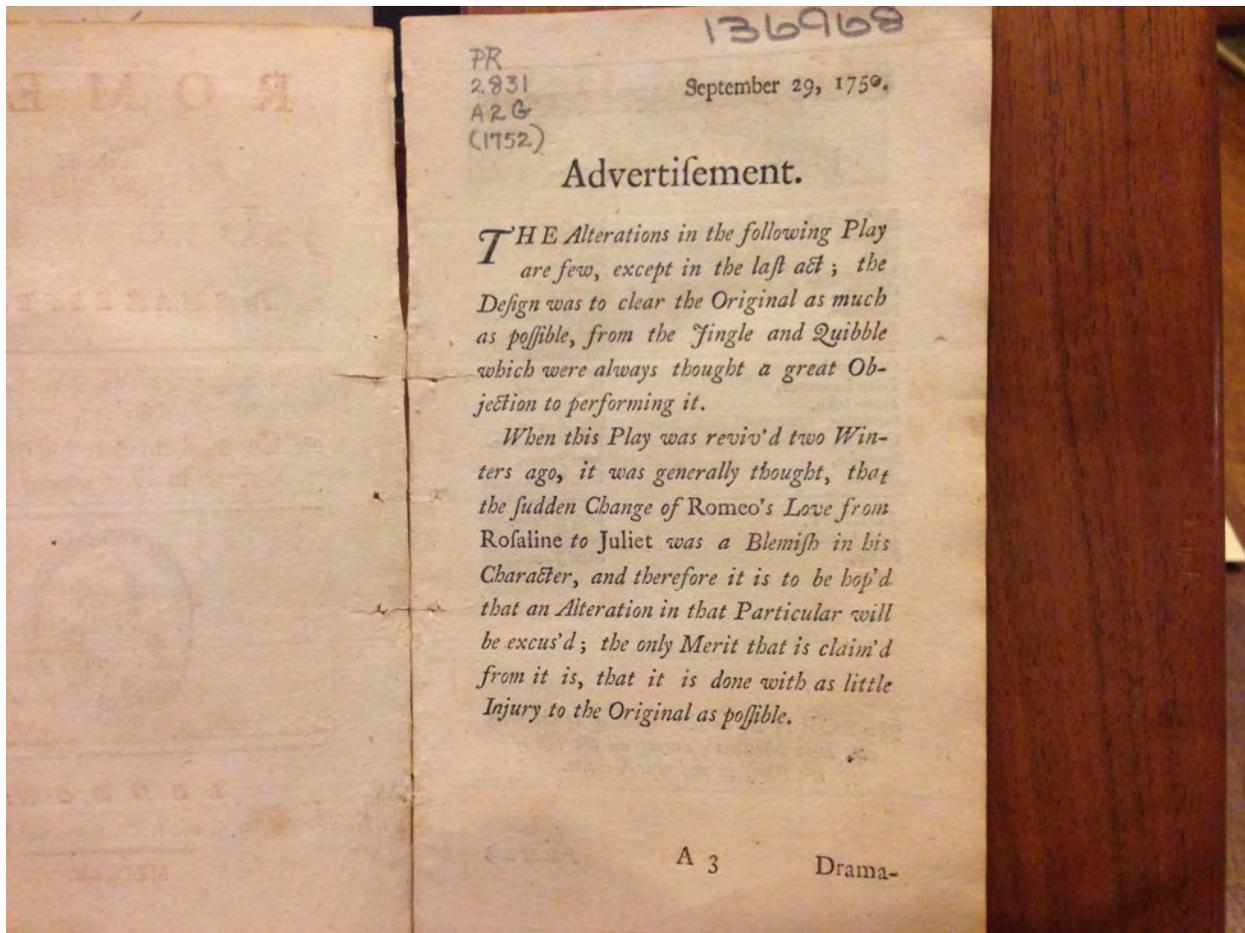


Figure 5: *Romeo and Juliet*, Printed for J. and R. Tonson, S. Draper, 1752. Advertisement page. (Honnold-Mudd Library Special Collections)

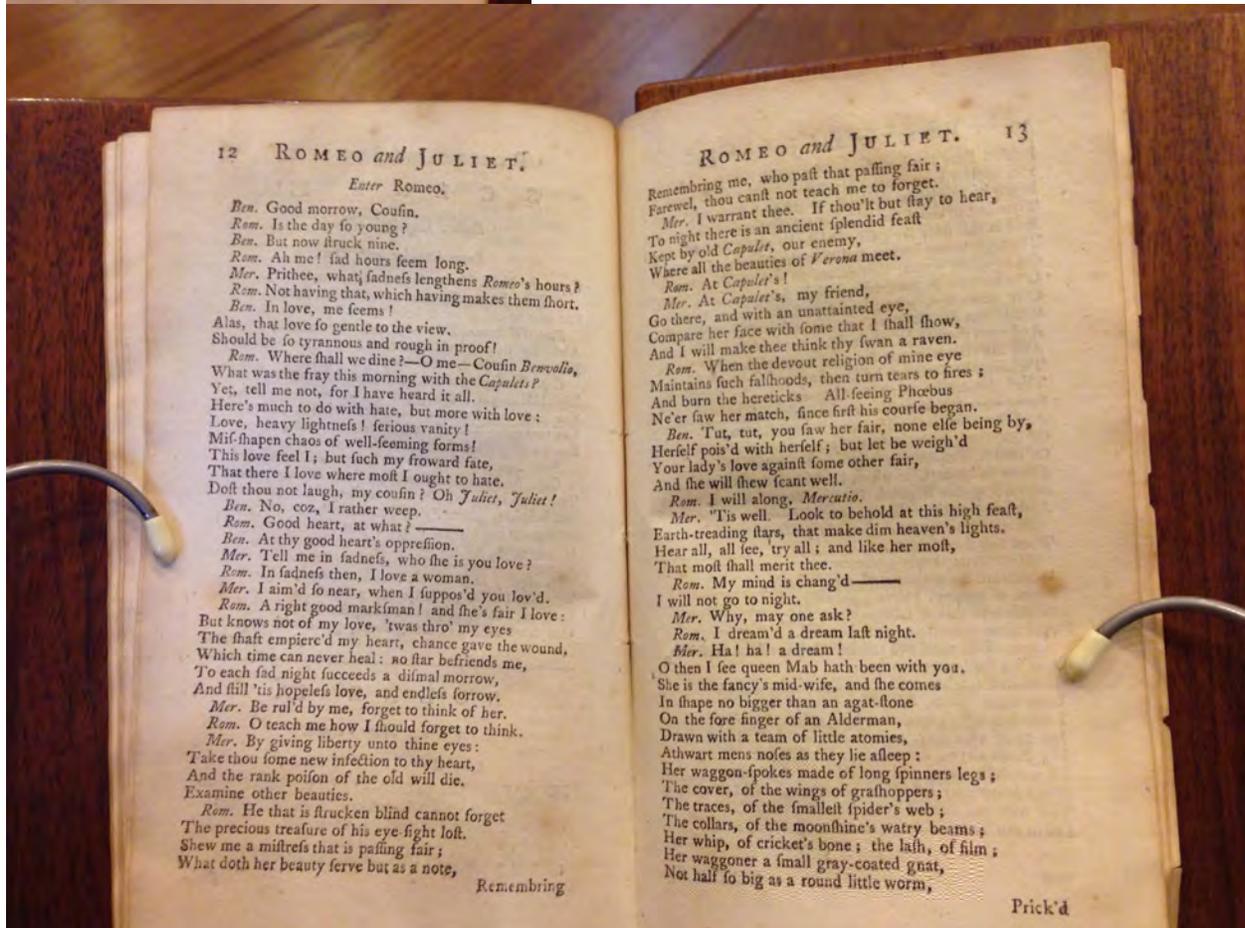
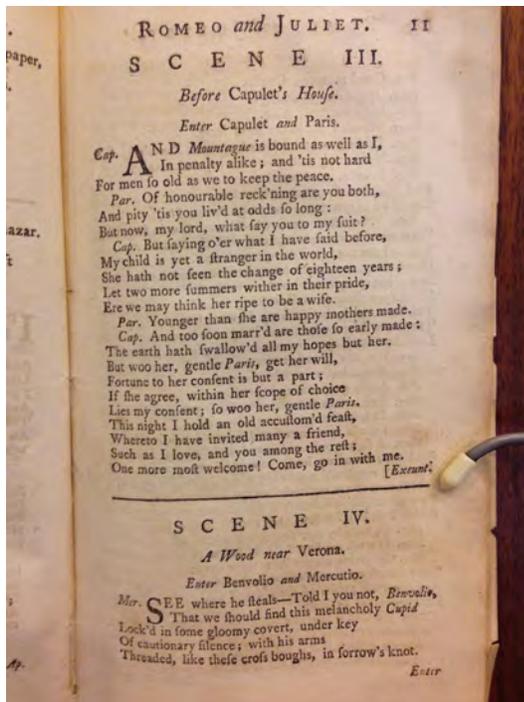


Figure 6: *Romeo and Juliet*, Printed for J. and R. Tonson, S. Draper, 1752. Act I Scene IV. (Honnold-Mudd Library Special Collections)