



What's in a name?

William Shakespeare

Romeo and Juliet (1594–96)

Act II, Scene I

This is the famous 'Balcony Scene' from Romeo and Juliet, where the two lovers declare their love to each other. While Romeo praises Juliet's beauty with images in the style of the courtly tradition, Juliet turns out to be an unconventional character. When she asks why Romeo is a Montague, she reflects upon the relationship between a 'name' and 'what it stands for'; she underlines that Romeo is her lover and yet an enemy by his name.

ROMEO [Coming forward] He jests at scars that never felt a wound.
But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise¹, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
5 Who is already sick and pale with grief
That thou, her maid², art far more fair than she.
Be not her maid, since she is envious.
Her vestal livery³ is but sick and green⁴;
And none but fools do wear it: cast it off.
10 It is my lady, O it is my love;
O that she knew she were.
She speaks, yet she says nothing. What of that?
Her eye discourses: I will answer it.
I am too bold⁵: 'tis not to me she speaks.
15 Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,
Having some business, do entreat her eyes
To twinkle in their spheres till they return.
What if her eyes were there, they in her head?
The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars
20 As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night.
See how she leans her cheek upon her hand!
O that I were a glove upon that hand,
25 That I might touch that cheek. [...]

JULIET 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thy self, though not a Montague.
O be some other name! What's Montague?
It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face,
30 Nor any part belonging to a man.
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes,

1 Arise. Sorgi.

2 maid. Damigella.

3 livery. Abito.

4 sick and green. Malata e verde (d'invidia).

5 bold. Ardito.



35 Without that title⁶. Romeo, doff⁷ thy name;
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.

ROMEO I take thee at thy word.

Call me but love, and I'll be new baptised;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

40 JULIET What man art thou that, thus bescreened⁸ in night,
So stumblest on my counsel⁹?

ROMEO By a name

I know not how to tell thee who I am.

45 My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself
Because it is an enemy to thee.

Had I it written, I would tear the word.

6 Without that title. Senza quel nome.

7 doff. Butta via.

8 bescreened. Nascosto alla vista.

9 So stumblest on my counsel? Inciampi nel mio pensiero segreto?

COMPREHENSION

1 ANSWER the following questions.

- 1 Where is the scene set?
- 2 When does it take place?
- 3 How does Romeo describe Juliet?
- 4 Why does Juliet ask Romeo to reject his name?
- 5 Do the two lovers reveal their love to each other?

ANALYSIS

2 FOCUS on Romeo.

- 1 What are the main themes of his monologue?
- 2 What love does he embody?

3 WHAT impact do you think has on the audience the transition from monologue to dialogue in line 38?

4 CONCENTRATE on Juliet.

- 1 What is her reaction to Romeo's speech?
- 2 What is her attitude to life?
- 3 Analyse lines 26–47. Underline all the images belonging to the semantic area of reality and appearance. Then fill the table below.

| Reality | Apparence |
|---------|-----------|
| | |

How does Juliet's reflection upon language shake the medieval code?

- 4 Do you think Romeo shares Juliet's view and if so, is he conscious of it? (lines 43–47).

YOUR TURN

5 DISCUSS the analogies between this play and the sonnet sequence as regards the characters portrayed, the language and the theme of love.