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*TRANSLATING LIFE:*  
Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics

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From Stage to Page:  
Character through Theatre Practices  
in *Romeo and Juliet*

LYNETTE HUNTER  
and PETER LICHTENFELS

The question that we would like to open up in this essay is how can we talk about 'character'. Working together on an edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, one of us being a theatre director and the other a literary critic, we have found that an area where vocabularies clash most often is that of attributing motivation to the characters' roles. This emerges most clearly in the translation of these roles from the page to the stage but attribution of motives can be informed by a reversed translation from stage practice to reading strategy. Such attribution immediately calls into play the recent critiques in literary criticism of individuality made by discourse studies, the developing field of 'subjectivity' or subject positions within ideology, or the recent emergence of standpoint theory to discuss authenticity and autobiography.<sup>1</sup> 'Character' is in effect a highly problematic term, generating accusations of unselfconscious essentialism. Possibly the most telling critique has been that of Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, who argue that characters are all too often 'imagined as having developed prior to and independent of the plays in which they appear and as speaking a language that reflects this experiential and psychological history'.<sup>2</sup> So it has to be said, that our underlying concern with 'translation' is one that transposes between the vocabularies of the theatre and those of the literary critic. However, in this essay what we would like specifically to explore are methods that the actor uses for translating a part from the page into an engaged

and engaging individual on the stage. In so doing, we hope to address some of the unease felt by literary critics who dismiss 'character' as a matter of 'filling up stage prefixes'.<sup>3</sup>

The theatre director and the actor have to find reasons for everything the part tells them is done on stage and frequently turn to 'character'. This is particularly important with a play that offers conventionally recognizable roles, that encourage the audience to expect specific habits and movements of behaviour, as many of Shakespeare's plays do in drawing on medieval typology. But no part, however conventional, can be effectively acted by way of habit or tricks of the trade, and productions are always in danger of reducing type to stereotype. Moreover, the familiarity or distance that the people in a modern audience have from a particular type can play a large part in how much they themselves want to invest that type with character. *Romeo and Juliet* is a play of intense generic diversity, with types from the Petrarchan sonnet, from *Commedia dell'Arte*, and from the Latin satirists, continually disrupting the narrative flow and threatening to reduce it to farce. Indeed, Quarto one (Q1) focuses so clearly on the central romantic narrative that it shuts out the larger world of social and political commentary which Quarto two (Q2) makes available, and can easily slip from tragic dimensions into cliché.<sup>4</sup> The whole question of whether Q1 was 'transposed' into Q2, or the other way around, is of course a major issue in Shakespearean studies.<sup>5</sup> But what is clear is that the two versions of the play offer different approaches to character, and they offer differing resources to the actor developing an individual, with Q2 resolutely undermining any sense of a singular identity. In this essay we will focus on the resources found in Q2, and for two specific parts that are often reduced to stereotype.

We would argue that, like some readings, many productions founder on the idea of type and stereotype, by refusing to look past the superficial convention that predicts why the parts do certain things toward the work that actors have to do on finding out why they are doing and saying those particular things. Characters in Shakespeare's plays are frequently types that are delineated by historical studies either in contemporary theatrical traditions or in the many Early Modern books on conduct; but,



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by stereotype, we want to connote the often crude anachronistic reduction of type to predictable portrayal of habitual behaviour that can occur both in the theatre and in criticism. The generic instability of *Romeo and Juliet* asks the director and the actors to work on character, to use an old-fashioned phrase, to bring the parts to life, that is, to translate from page to stage by reinvention rather than by mere copying. For a director, character is a mask to be inhabited by a person. Character is brought alive through breath. Because the text poses structures to be resolved by breath, there has to be a person involved.<sup>6</sup> Directors may realize that they are producing fictions, but as a director you cannot read the text as a fiction alone because that does not solve the problem that, to let the line of words live, it has to pass through people.<sup>7</sup> No good actor makes the mistake of thinking that their character is a 'real' person but the text is brought alive by way of real people. If the character moves an audience, it is the actor playing the role who produces that effect. There is a point where directors and actors lose the definition of the words 'character' and 'actor' and work differently from the literary critic.

This essay will go on to look at a few scenes with parts based on types that are, to varying degrees, recognizable in twentieth-century drama, the Friar and more particularly the Nurse, and which are played with varying frequency as conventional and predictable. The exploration will look at how the process of acting and directing can insist on character rather than stereotype. It will be carried out by close technical analysis of the details of a few scenes, both their textual qualities and how these translate into potential performance, and how that translation can reinform the page of literary criticism. The kinds of transpositional strategies that we will be discussing belong to work found in rehearsal, in which actors have to acquire, primarily through breath, and therefore in their bodies, their physical presence, movement and voice, and also, in response to the presence of other people on stage, physiological memory of a large number of actions and speakings that have generated reasons for the words and movements. The introductory study of the Friar will foreground work on breath, and the more extended analysis of the Nurse will extend from breath into interaction with other characters.

When actors play a part, they need that physical memory<sup>8</sup> so that they can, at one and the same time, have the experience to perform, push the character through their bodies, and play the line as if it is the first time it is uttered and they do not know what will happen next. As Cicely Berry says, acting is 'at its best when the thoughts are discovered at the moment of speaking'.<sup>9</sup> The actors' task is to let the words surprise them every time they are played, so that they acquire what we refer to as 'weight'. Weight is not necessarily significance but a potential for the constitution of meaning. Actors who are not putting themselves through the present moment of the words will leave those words dead, and therefore dead for the audience. On stage, an actor only has enough time for the task at hand, and all the work in rehearsal has simply been preparation for getting that double-edged freedom of finding the word in performance. All the strategies discussed below are, therefore, in preparation for acting and, if at times they move toward finding motivation and at others precisely toward disrupting it, once on stage actors have to be able to perform the motivation of character moment by moment,<sup>10</sup> surprising themselves with the reasons released by the words and action.

The Friar in *Romeo and Juliet* is probably the part most often reduced to stereotype, and the lines for this character are among the most frequently cut from modern productions. We would here like to focus on an analysis of I.iii to introduce some of the ways in which rehearsal skills for developing a part through breath can help the actor to work on character, to effect a creative transposition from the type of the text to the moving presence of a theatrical actualization. The sententiousness of the Friar's vocabulary and the rhyming couplets in which he initially speaks are difficult to work with in the theatre. They can lead easily to a cliché of the boring, fusty, platitudinous priest. In the earlier sources the Friar is possibly like this, but Shakespeare changes the role, shortens it, makes it more to the point, and still leaves the actor with a lot of work to do. Actors faced with this work need to discover the reasons in the language for themselves, they have to find out how to inhabit the words.<sup>11</sup> To inhabit the

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words the actor needs to work in rehearsal with intonation, stress, resonance and the sheer physicality of sound, so that a word, or words, become part of the musculature. Available to them is a range of strategy and technique: argument, genre, line length, punctuation (controversial, but actors use it), rhyme, and word-specifics such as particular clusters of consonants and vowel sounds. All of these may alert one to the weight of the line, although not necessarily to its significance, which is sometimes for the audience alone. That the actor can escape consciously conveying significance is anathema to most literary critics, and difficult to explain. However, we will attempt to describe part of the process as we discuss some of the rehearsal practices.

From the (disputed) quatrain 'The grey-ey'd morn ...' to Romeo's salutation 'Good morrow, father ...',<sup>12</sup> the Friar moves from homiletic reasoning to a central moral, to the pragmatic everyday of the Capulets and Montagues. The movement is a procedure for persuasion: like a prayer, and more certainly like a sermon, as if the Friar is pursuing a collocation of reasonings from wholeness, to balance, to predominance and break-up. The speech has a choric function because it tells the story of the two families again, but also tells this particular story as one of mistaken virtue that can provide justification for vice. It foretells the ending with its reference to medicine and poison that 'stays all senses with the heart' (22), a foretelling that infuses the entire scene, with Romeo then asking for the Friar's help and holy physic (47-48), saying later that he will 'bury love' (78). It contains one possible mistake: that the grave is not always a womb that can issue children, as we find from the ending of the play—unless the deaths do bring about peace.

At the same time, the entire scene is in couplets which pose a theatrical problem which requires a theatrical solution. When dealing with rhyming couplets, a common danger is that the actor gets taken over by the rhyme and does not inhabit the words. Therefore you have to treat the potentially predictable couplet rhyme as if it is an accident, not fore-ordained, and focus on the physicality of what is being said, or on the response to another actor that is wanted, with the couplet providing parallel significance often associated with musicality.<sup>13</sup> To work on this



the actor may, for example, concentrate on the clusters of sound in the lines, as in the couplet 'The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb:/ What is her burying grave, that is her womb' (5-6). One unusual rehearsal strategy, that derives from Cicely Berry's detailed work on linguistic experiment<sup>14</sup> and focuses on breath, is to say the lines only with their vowel sounds or only with their consonants, keeping the stress of the words and giving the silent 'e' an 'eh' sound. This would render the lines, as vowel sounds, thus:

e ea a a u eh o e i e oo /  
a i e u yi a eh a i e oo

and, as consonants:

th ts n t r s m th r s h r t mb /  
wh t s h r b r ng gr v t s h r w mb

In phonetics the vowel sounds would be rendered as:

i: ɜ: æ eɪ ə ʌ ə ɪ ɜ: u:  
ɒ ɪ ɜ: e i: ɪ eɪ æ ɪ ɜ: u:

and the consonants as:

ð θ ð ts n tʃ z m ð z h t m  
w t z h b r j ŋ gr v ð t z h w m

Initially it might be observed that there are many vowel sounds that are different, but there is an internal rhythm of 'nature' / 'mother' / 'is her' in the first line. The balance of the second line around the comma leaves it more self-contained than the first, especially in the matching of 'What is her ...' with 'that is her ...', and in the movement from the polysyllabic 'burying' to the monosyllabic 'womb'. In addition, the phonetics points out a balance emerging around 'nature's' and 'mother is'. Yet there are cross-references between the two lines that insist on wider connections, in 'that's' and 'that is', and particularly in the internal sounds, clearly indicated by the phonetics, of 'is her' and, in the second line, 'is her ... is her', and, of course, 'tomb' and 'womb'. The actors, unlike the phoneticist, sound the silent 'e' when undertaking this exercise to render the context for the



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consonants when they are enunciated on their own, but the phonetics indicate further elements, which actors might feel in their muscles or which they might miss. The two lines of consonants contain the repeated pattern of 't z h' with 'w' and 'd' in three different arrangements over the two lines, which an audience might interpret as conveying meaning. Further, the balance point of the second line hovers over the back consonants in 'ying' of 'burying', with whose deep resonance, it could be argued, we have significant cultural associations.

This kind of analysis makes the literary critic want to point out that the structure of the sound carries meaning. In doing so, we are of course arguing about significance from personal experience of sound and rhythm. But however tempting it is to carry out such a literary analysis, and one could argue that it is analogous to the reading of metaphor and just as valuable in its social specificity, the point of displaying the exercise on paper is to give readers, who may not be familiar with it, a sense of a technique available to the actor. A feeling for how the exercise works, and how it empties the words of conventional meaning for the actor, cannot be reached unless it is carried out by saying the lines of vowels and consonants aloud. If the exercise is carried out over a number of lines, say at least five, the sheer difficulty of saying simply the consonants out loud requires extraordinary physical exertion since the breath has to carry the gaps of the vowels. The vowels themselves are easier on the body but need exceptional attention to nuances of shift.<sup>15</sup> The entire procedure does two things: it releases potentially new meaning to which the actor may pay attention, but, more importantly, when the actor goes back to saying the lines as a whole, the words acquire definition as objects that may or may not convey significance. The breakdown into the variousness of sound emphasizes the complexity of each phrase, so the couplets do not sink into sameness.

Such tightly formulated couplets are typical of the Friar's speech until he reaches the part in his soliloquy that begins to involve the two families. Here we find the first run-over line, where the grammar forces you into the next line at 'encamp them still/ In man ...', from which point the balance of his words is far less consistent. Because the end of a line functions in the same

way as punctuation, run-over lines like full stops, commas and other textual markings clearly structure the way an actor develops the shape of the verse. In general, lightly punctuated lines put the responsibility for shape far more on the actor and, similarly, a run-over line pulls the anchor on significance and releases energy.<sup>16</sup> But the actor may gain most energy for the couplets when responding to others on stage, as here when the Friar talks with Romeo. One of the indications of their particular intimacy is the way they handle the sententiousness and variability of the couplet. This is a development of the previous scene which Juliet and Romeo conclude in couplets, and even share the final couplet; at the same time it recalls their first meeting which is all in couplets. It also underlines Romeo's personal skill in picking up the verbal techniques of those with whom he is intimate. As the scene develops, Romeo acquires the Friar's sententious couplets wherever there is a grammatically complete set of two lines (41-42, 49-50, 81-82), but speaks more usually in enjambements (45-47, 55-57 ...). Similarly the Friar, when he first responds to Romeo's admission that he wants to marry Juliet, is infected by his hesitation. His speech is full of apostrophes buying him time, and metaphors that do not help his argument, full of run-on or travelling couplets (62-63, 63-64, 65-66) that gradually settle back down into sententious couplets (67-68), as he reasserts his position as teacher chiding an errant pupil. As so often in Shakespeare's dialogue, one character's words tell you how another is behaving so, a few lines later, Romeo says 'I pray thee chide me not ...' (81). The two move on to share several half-lines equally<sup>17</sup> as the Friar attempts to identify with Romeo, saying 'come young waverer, come and go', wavering himself as he says it, and 'I'll thy assistant be' rather than teacher, as if he is renegotiating his position and status. Underlying this verse exchange is an implicit argument that, because Romeo has given up Rosaline on the Friar's advice, he has implicated him in his choice of Juliet.

The Friar in this scene can be read as tedious or as proof of the limits of rhetoric, but neither of these is a sensible proposition to put to an actor who has to deal with the reality that you cannot have a 'boring' character on stage being boring for very long.<sup>18</sup> It

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is possible to make a boring character funny by foregrounding that quality but, on the whole, this is not the position of the Friar. Hence he has to have a more densely inhabited character to make the words work, to effect the creative translation that will satisfy the audience. The actor must work with the interaction between the words and the body, and one way of doing so is through breath. What is undoubtedly the result is a sense of an individual to whom the other actors on stage, and the audience, can attribute motivation. This is not a matter of hanging a coat on the correct peg, but of responding to the engagement that the actor has in translating from page to stage, and constructing the common ground that allows us to value their actions.

Like the Friar, the Nurse can offer a clearly identifiable type, but, unlike the Friar, the type is one with which British audiences at least still feel familiar: possibly the loyal family retainer but, more likely, because of her overt sexuality, the warmhearted 'easy' woman, possibly a whore.<sup>19</sup> Thomas Overbury's 'Macquerela, in Plain English, a Bawd' describes a woman so similar to the Nurse that either Overbury had seen the play, or Shakespeare and he are using the same Theophrastan source. A bawd is an older woman, once a prostitute, who now acts as a facilitator or go-between for other women. Yet to play the Nurse to type would quickly pall into stereotype unless you had an extremely good comic actor. The sheer extent of her presence in the play means that the part may well have been played by a good actor, but there is more to the character than type. The text gives her a specific characterization in what is called 'the Nurse's delay'<sup>20</sup> which occurs in every single one of her speaking scenes and in her command, or lack of it, over register and appropriateness of speech.

The first occasion, I.iii, in which the audience meets her, she is played alongside the mother and Juliet, the mother saying at the start that she wants to talk in secret with Juliet but then changing her mind and in the process alerting the Nurse to some important decision. That she grasps what the mother will later say about marriage is indicated by her arriving at the line, 'I might live to see thee married once' (61), at the end of her long storytelling. The Nurse begins with a series of stories about her



own life, and about the young Juliet. Once again Q1 provides just the first bare narrative, while Q2 encourages the Nurse to tell the story of Juliet's falling over as a child twice, each time rather differently. The first time the story is told, it is shaped by way of apostrophes of a religious kind, which can be played not simply as garrulous interjections, but as if to give her time to think of how to narrate. The result is circular, jerky, leaving lots of gaps. But the second time the story is told, it is far better constructed, to the point and shorter; the Nurse is in control of it. Watching this process helps the audience to understand that the Nurse, as she later proves, has little control over formal devices for narrating, arguing and even speaking. Yes, the story is comic in a gently titillating way, but it also represents the Nurse's way of dealing with anticipated loss, telling Juliet how she became a substitute for her own daughter, how Juliet's presence carries memories of her own husband, how she will miss Juliet.

The Nurse's anecdotal, autobiographical narration works in contrast to the mother's formality and highly conceited language. Once her long story is done, the scene begins to work by way of the tension between two rhythms, one being to do with status and the other with sexuality. The mother names Paris as the best catch of Verona, and the Nurse says, 'Lady, such a man/ As all the world—' (75-76), stopping herself as if to prevent an indiscretion about his behaviour, and re-routing her comment into 'why, he's a man of wax' (76), with its sexual play on 'wax'. The mother interjects that Verona 'hath not such a flower' (77), and the Nurse immediately picks up 'he's a flower, in faith a very flower', where 'flower' suggests the sexually mature. And following the mother's long development (not in Q1) of how lovers are like books, the Nurse deflates the conceit saying 'No less, nay bigger. Women grow by men' (95). What gets established in this scene is the Nurse's humour and sexuality, as well as her love for Juliet and the way she works hand in hand with Juliet's mother, even though in a different register. We also learn about the difficulty that she has with narration, which leads to her loose autobiographical prose with its air of an informal conversation. This in turn tells us about the way the Nurse controls the pace of the scene because of her need to work on



Juliet. Once again Q1 provides the Nurse with the opportunity to encourage the Nurse to appear as a child twice, each time the story is told, it is shaped by the Nurse's kind, which can be played not only as a child but as if to give her time to appear as a child. The Nurse's performance is circular, jerky, leaving lots of time for the audience to understand that the Nurse is in control of the audience to understand that the Nurse has little control over formal diction and even speaking, Yes, the story is told but it also represents the Nurse's emotional loss, telling Juliet how she will miss Juliet, how she will miss Juliet. The Nurse's biographical narration works in a formal and highly conceited manner. Once done, the scene begins to work with two rhythms, one being to do with sexuality. The mother names Paris and the Nurse says, 'Lady, such a man' (76), stopping herself as if to control her behaviour, and re-routing her speech of wax' (76), with its sexual play that Verona 'hath not such a man' immediately picks up 'he's a flower, 'flower' suggests the sexually charged development (not in the Nurse's deflates the conceit of men grow by men' (95). What the Nurse's humour and sexuality, the way she works hand in hand with in a different register. We also see the Nurse's with narration, which leads to the Nurse's rose with its air of an informal speech about the way the Nurse works because of her need to work on

ways of narrating. But none of these elements answer the question why she has such difficulty, and this is a central issue for the actor playing the part.

There is a similar need to listen to the Nurse's potential control over pace in II.iv when she meets Mercutio, Benvolio and Romeo on the street the day after the ball. The Nurse is hurt, affronted and embarrassed by Mercutio's rudeness toward her, and despite Romeo's attempts to defend Mercutio and apologize for him, she is released into a tirade of anger. At first she directs this toward her manservant, who turns it back toward her, which makes her even more angry. Humiliated even by her own servant, she says, 'What she [Juliet] bid me say, I will keep to myself' (161-62). Throughout these two angry speeches, the Nurse is abrupt, full of short sentences and rough language. She stops and starts as if she cannot find the words to express herself yet recognizes that she cannot just remain silent. When Romeo attempts to 'protest', she interrupts him, but why does she do so? The actor could look to motivation and suggest that it is because she wants to turn his protest into a proposition, or because she is being sarcastic, or because she thinks he has succeeded in making his 'protest'. Certainly the interruption ends with 'which, as I take it, is a gentlemanlike offer' (175) as if, after her failure to control the situation earlier, when she was undefended by Romeo, she is not to determine the destination of his protest. But it may also be part of her delaying tactics.

Romeo does go on to propose marriage and tries to pay her for her actions as a go-between, to buy her off, but she does not at first take the money, presumably just because she does not want Romeo to think she is a bawd. Only when Romeo gives her some practical instructions does she begin to come round and shift the rhythm of her speech toward something more emollient, with 'Now God in Heaven bless thee' (190). The speech then moves back into her earlier voice as she begins to bring in her autobiographical reminiscences, 'When 'twas a little prating thing ...' (196), and finally she explains to Romeo what he is up against in Paris, and what Juliet actually feels. In other words, she has come to trust him because he has proved that he can act, is not just words, and she has got involved personally with him. They

conclude the scene with a shared joke. As with the earlier scene, she delays getting to the point until she can control her words, but here also we see her delaying until she has tested the person she speaks to and can trust them to treat her properly. The Nurse's delay is not merely a humorous stylistic feature, but an integral part of her strategy for dealing with her vulnerable position as a servant.

The return to the Nurse's earlier voice is an addition found in Q2, not in Q1, and unlike the Friar's opening scene which remains largely unchanged, the Nurse's addition allows for much fuller characterization, insisting that the actor inhabits the part rather than play to conventional expectation. Literary critics often object to taking the parts as characters and arguing from motivation or individuality because, to do so, assumptions have to be made about 'individuality' which may not be appropriate. However, critics also seem less worried by taking the parts as types, or even as stereotypes, and arguing from functionality or convention or their role in a particular generic context, even though, to do so, similar assumptions have to be made about 'role'. Certainly to take the parts as 'subject positions' and argue from subjectivity, or the effects of repression by ideology, is to assume many aspects of ideology and discourse that are just as open to discussion as a consideration of the parts as characters.

The actor, however, has to find reasons in breath, musculature, rhythm, response, interaction and movement, reasons drawn from the experience and training of their bodies. When we think about our bodies, the words we use are tied to convention, habit and discourse, but the actor's body does not necessarily translate the memory of experience in the same way. The actor has to be able to draw on energy that makes sense in terms of bodily capacities and abilities.<sup>21</sup> The character of the Nurse here, and in the scenes immediately following, can attempt a tight control over the pace of speech and response, which is partly premeditative when, for example, she tests Romeo, and partly because she is waiting to assess response, and partly because she needs the time to find the way to say what she has to say.

Throughout II.v the Nurse employs the same tactics, with Juliet now rather than Romeo. By delaying the news Juliet wants

l joke. As with the earlier scene, until she can control her words, until she has tested the person whom she wants to treat her properly. The humorous stylistic feature, but an appealing with her vulnerable posi-

ier voice is an addition found in the Friar's opening scene which the Nurse's addition allows for much that the actor inhabits the part in a way that exceeds the formal expectation. Literary critics who see the Nurse as characters and arguing from a desire to do so, assumptions have to be made about which may not be appropriate. Worried by taking the parts as if they were characters and arguing from functionality or a particular generic context, even assumptions have to be made about the Nurse's 'subject positions' and argue that the Nurse's repression by ideology, is to be seen in her speech and discourse that are just as a function of the parts as characters.

Her reasons in breath, musculature, and movement, reasons drawn from the Nurse's body of their bodies. When we think of the Nurse's body as tied to convention, habit and tradition, it does not necessarily translate into the same way. The actor has to be seen in terms of bodily capacity of the Nurse here, and in the attempt to attempt a tight control over the scene, which is partly premeditative and partly because she is partly because she needs the time as to say.

She employs the same tactics, with her delaying the news Juliet wants

she slows Juliet down, at the same time testing the strength of her feelings. At the end of her lengthy complaints, the Nurse suddenly says 'where is your mother', drawing Juliet's attention to her mother's opinion but also reminding us of the responsibility that devolves on the Nurse in the mother's absence. Like many of her breathless apostrophes, the interjection is directed toward things she recognizes but which she finds difficult to control because of her position as a woman and a servant. Even more complaining slows the pace before she delivers her message at last and moves for the first time into rather formal verse, concluding with a rhyming couplet of her own and then a shared couplet with Juliet.<sup>22</sup> As she moves into verse she also takes her place among people in the play whose actions affect others and must be reckoned with.<sup>23</sup> The structure of II.v provides the pattern for III.ii, the next scene between the Nurse and Juliet, where Juliet's long soliloquy after the Nurse's entry and slow revelation of what has happened displays greater maturity as the Nurse shows less control. The Nurse plays the confusion of 'we are undone' and 'whoever would have thought it', indicating that she thinks she has made a misjudgment. In effect, she is panicking; after all within two to three hours of sending Juliet to the Friar to be married, she has gone for the rope ladder, seen Tybalt dead as she was returning, and heard the news of Romeo's banishment. Given her role in their relationship, she must be afraid that she will be held responsible. She cannot tell Juliet the truth directly, but also she is testing Juliet's responses, playing out the grief. First she lets Juliet think Romeo is dead, and only tells Juliet about Tybalt when Juliet says she wants to die (59-60),<sup>24</sup> after which she explains that Romeo is banished for Tybalt's death.

Despite maintaining her control over the pace of the scene, the actor has good indications that the part is changing and that the Nurse is increasingly out of her depth. The Nurse's habitual speech patterns are filled with interruptions, their rhythm changes all the time and proceeds in stops and starts, so that, when she moves into language that is sustained in any way, it is unusual, it alerts us to a different mode. Here in III.ii, we find the excessive repetition of 'he's dead, he's dead, he's dead', followed



by the balanced line, 'We are undone, lady, we are undone', and the varied repetition of 'he's gone, he's kill'd, he's dead'. Her speech goes from interruption to repetition very quickly, and the actor can easily get trapped inside the regularity of the repetitive iambs or attempt to get out of them by playing that regularity as a comic feature. It requires a different kind of energy to work on variousness in the rhythm to make the words carry weight, and, when this happens, we see the actor in a different way.<sup>25</sup>

The difference in the Nurse's energy carries over onto Juliet herself, and an instructive example of the different interaction that actors develop in translating from the page comes from a comparison between Q1 and Q2. After the Nurse has told Juliet about Romeo's banishment, she has in Q1 a set piece, 'There's no trust,/ No faith, no honesty in men' (85-86), but little else until she asks Juliet to go to her family. Upon Juliet's threatening to commit suicide, she offers to take a message to Romeo. In Q2 the set piece occurs after a much extended speech by Juliet condemning Romeo's action, so that it seems to reinforce her feeling. As a result, Juliet's about-face attack on the Nurse for saying such things shows the young woman radically changing her mind. This abrupt reversal also causes the Nurse, in Q2, to point out, 'Will you speak well of him that kill'd your cousin?' (96), which sets up Juliet's logical claim that 'My husband lives, that Tybalt would have slain' (105), again only in Q2. In Q2 Juliet matures into a reasoning and complex woman of tragic proportions around the added wordplay (44-50) on 'eye', 'I' and 'ay' in which she questions her existence. This follows on immediately from the dense cluster of 'o's in the Nurse's 'O Romeo, Romeo,/ Who ever would have thought it? Romeo!' (41-42), 'o' forming part of a field of sound that recurs throughout the play particularly when indicating the limitations of language to communicate. Juliet's 'I' is part of a reasoned inquiry, the Nurse's 'o' is a well of absence/presence.

In Q2 the Nurse's role changes because she is responding to a different character. She is no longer a substitute mother or older retainer who gives advice, but a servant from whom Juliet has begun to distance herself not only because of the Nurse's perceived criticism of Romeo, but also because of Juliet's rapid



done, lady, we are undone', and 'one, he's kill'd, he's dead'. Her repetition very quickly, and the regularity of the repetitive of them by playing that regularity different kind of energy to work to make the words carry weight, the actor in a different way.<sup>25</sup>

energy carries over onto Juliet's example of the different interaction from the page comes from a 2. After the Nurse has told Juliet has in Q1 a set piece, 'There's no men' (85-86), but little else until ily. Upon Juliet's threatening to take a message to Romeo. In Q2 such extended speech by Juliet to that it seems to reinforce her out-face attack on the Nurse for young woman radically changing also causes the Nurse, in Q2, to of him that kill'd your cousin?' al claim that 'My husband lives, 105), again only in Q2. In Q2 and complex woman of tragic wordplay (44-50) on 'eye', 'I' and existence. This follows on immediate 'o's in the Nurse's 'O Romeo, thought it? Romeo!' (41-42), 'o' that recurs throughout the play the limitations of language to of a reasoned inquiry, the Nurse's

es because she is responding to a ger a substitute mother or older servant from whom Juliet has only because of the Nurse's ut also because of Juliet's rapid

transition into an adult. The Nurse moves from a position where she holds power and information to a position where Juliet is arguing with her and taking responsibility for herself. Juliet moves into her suicide threat by way of rhyming couplets that indicate her formality and seriousness. Yet although the Nurse is frightened, she continues to be involved, agreeing to take Juliet's ring to Romeo in order to stop her killing herself.

The next scene of any note between the Nurse and Juliet occurs at III.v, when Lord and Lady Capulet try to convince Juliet to marry Paris. The Nurse says nothing at all until Juliet goes on her knees to her father and the father responds brutally. At this point the Nurse tries to deflect the anger onto herself, but is told by Capulet, 'Hold your tongue' (170). Capulet's power is such that even after he leaves, when Juliet tries to get her mother to talk to her, the reply is, 'Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word' (202). Alone with the Nurse, Juliet asks her three times for advice, and when the Nurse finally breaks her silence, she withholds any emotional warmth, calls her 'Madam', and tells her to marry Paris. Juliet cross-examines her and, after she has left, says, 'Go counsellor./ Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain' (239-40). And the Nurse says nothing more to her either in IV.ii or IV.iii, even though the stage directions say that she is present on stage. The actor must ask why this talkative woman is silenced. If you work through the tensions of status, responsibility, parental and substitute position, then perhaps there is a reason for it in Juliet's emotional distance. The stories that the Nurse has told to gain emotional proximity are no longer necessary. Certainly, she is no more in a position of power with respect to Juliet. The function of testing the character is now no longer appropriate. Nor does she again transgress the wishes of Juliet's mother and father. Therefore there is no need to listen for the response in order to assess her own situation and its potential dangers.

The final scenes the Nurse participates in cluster around Juliet's false death, in a way that points up what the play does with type quite clearly. IV.iv arrives in precipitous contrast to the darkness of the preceding scene in which Juliet talks of death prior to taking the drug, and moves the action into an excess of

farce. The Nurse controls the register of the dialogue, which is one of banter and sexual excitement that she is familiar with. Capulet sounds very like the three young men in I.iv as he orders the servants about, and cries fatefully, 'Make haste, make haste', when he orders the Nurse to wake up Juliet. Throughout the scene the audience forgets about Juliet for a while and enters the world of the family, only to be thrown back, still carried on the Nurse's excitement, to IV.v in which the Nurse has returned fully to the vocabulary and the short sentence structure of her first scene.

The calling back of this energy brings back the time prior to all the unexpected events which have taken place between Juliet and Romeo. The Nurse's actions restore a sense of normality that completely erases Romeo, as she speaks partly to the audience, including them in her excitement and sexual anticipation (10). Her energy becomes anxiety with 'I must needs wake you ...' (14), and then panic with 'Lady! Lady! Lady! / Alas, alas! Help, Help! My lady's dead' (14-15), these repetitions recalling the energy of III.ii where she laments the death of Tybalt, her best friend.<sup>26</sup> Again, because she is without control over words and, as if not wanting to bring the news, possibly fearful that her part may be found out, when Lady Capulet asks her twice what is the matter, the Nurse cannot explain. She just points, and cries, 'O lamentable day!' (17), 'Look, look! O heavy day!' (18). Lady Capulet moves directly into the Nurse's register, saying, 'O me, O me! My child, my only life ...' (19). When the father appears, the Nurse does tell him, 'She's dead, deceas'd! She's dead! Alack the day!' (23). The mother immediately reverses the line, echoing the Nurse's lament in III.ii, 'Alack the day! She's dead, she's dead, she's dead!' (24). Lord Capulet responds with very controlled language, but paradoxically complains that death 'will not let me speak' (32), as if his words have no significance.

From the moment the Friar, Paris and the musicians enter, the family goes into a formal lamentation that is almost choric in its distance from the events. It is as if the scene has shifted from the personal and familial out to the public, so that there has to be a display of grief. Each character regains formal control over register except the Nurse, whose speech reiterates the field of

'o's she earlier spoke on Tybalt's death: 'O woe! O woeful, woeful, woeful day ...' (49-54). The production of the 'o', coming from the depth of the body, is one of the actor's most difficult tasks. It is associated in many acting traditions with the deepest level of breath, below the solar plexus, and with the fullest sound that humans can make because of what it does to the shape of the mouth and because of the resonance it achieves.<sup>27</sup> The 'o' is what you mean to say before you go on to articulate anything, so each 'o' is specific to what is going to follow. An 'o' is the sound of what the actor will next shape. Deprived of any narration, the actor's playing can translate the Nurse into a character, tragic because without language, or into a stereotype in a melodrama of an inevitable and predictable story, and the lamentation offers similar opportunities.

The formal lamentation, which comes from nowhere like the Queen Mab speech and is just as generically disruptive, proceeds from the Father, through Paris (depending on Q1 or Q2), Lady Capulet, the Nurse, Paris again, and then starts up once more with the Father. With the circle beginning again, the Father's speech becomes emotional, excessive, repetitive like the Nurse's, as he says, 'O child, O child!'. And at this point the Friar intervenes, either because he perceives the words taking over Capulet as they do with Mercutio, or because he sees the grief becoming competitive. The scene is taken right out of a *Commedia dell'Arte* scene where this would be expected. Indeed, the scene can be played as if it were farce. But if the parts are not played seriously, with the actors trying fully to inhabit them as characters, the roles are devalued; and the audience will not care about the characters if they are simply fools.

The function of the scene is partly to present Juliet's death first, and as valuable, with people grieving over it, so that it is out of the way and there is space later on to develop Romeo's death. But the fact that it is structured on a generically disruptive element of *Commedia dell'Arte* alerts the audience to the effect of a 'play within a play' that asks them to take the generically comic and potentially stereotypical as serious and complex. In other words, the audience watches a comedic scene played seriously. The scene is placed between two others, IV.iv, and the

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second part of IV.v, that through their excessive farce and comedic aspects underline that it is played against the expectation of structure. This positioning carries forward the intercutting of the tragic with the comic from IV.iii to IV.iv to IV.v, where the comic scenes make the audience forget what has happened immediately before, where they halt the flow of the tragic narrative before swinging back and forth between tragic and comic, so that the play has no inevitable momentum until Act V. To play the scene as Commedia dell'Arte is possible although difficult. It produces immediate comic satisfaction but works against the internal rhythms of the drama that balance here in a tragicomic mix between the opening and closing movements of comedy and tragedy respectively. Types can make a shortlived impact on the audience through stereotypical playing but without an attempt to motivate them as actual human beings, as characters, they become mere appendages and lose the energy that situates the central narrative within a social context.

Character is a problem for literary critics primarily because it has come to imply fixity. In the theatre character is necessarily not a fixed entity but is always subject to translation, worked on in rehearsal, and changed in performance. Even the phrase 'character actor' signifies an actor who has created a particular type which is infused with new life every time it is played. Yet we have all seen acting where that work is not carried out to any considerable extent, so that the actor reproduces habitual movements and inflections upon which they have come to depend and which render the character flat and stereotypical, translating from the page to the stage by mere repetition rather than reinvention. Farce is a relatively stable genre of theatre in which there are many types: played well it is exhilarating but most often it falls flat. Shakespeare's plays are at the other end of the spectrum and are frequently generically unstable. *Romeo and Juliet* is particularly so, and consistently plays *with* and *off* type rather than *in* type. Many productions deal with its instability by fixing on the recognizable types and the central romantic narrative, but this will not bring the play to life.

We could say the same for literary criticism: that the critic has



ough their excessive farce and it is played against the expectation carries forward the intercut from IV.iii to IV.iv to IV.v, where the audience forget what has happened to halt the flow of the tragic narrative between tragic and comic, so the momentum until Act V. To play this is possible although difficult. It is dissatisfaction but works against the balance that here in a tragicomic losing movements of comedy and make a shortlived impact on the playing but without an attempt to human beings, as characters, they lose the energy that situates the context.

erary critics primarily because it the theatre character is necessarily subject to translation, worked in performance. Even the phrase actor who has created a particular life every time it is played. Yet we work is not carried out to any actor reproduces habitual movements which they have come to depend and that and stereotypical, translating mere repetition rather than restorable genre of theatre in which all it is exhilarating but most often are at the other end of the specially unstable. *Romeo and Juliet* is why plays *with* and *off* type rather deal with its instability by fixing the central romantic narrative, but e. erary criticism: that the critic has

to allow the words to work with them rather than simply bringing a set of ideas to the text and gridding them down onto it so that it forms a desired pattern. But the relationship of the critic with their audience is different from the relationship between the actor/director and their audience. Both perform a response to the text, but the theatre audience rarely looks for a 'correct' interpretation. An actor may find reasons for a character to do something, but the members of the audience attribute their own motivation to what they see. Criticism, however, carries the weight of potential 'truth' in its examinations of the text, and this is why critics get worried about character, in case discussion of character closes off response by implying a true and therefore final interpretation. Certainly criticism needs a better vocabulary for looking at character and attributing motivation because 'character' is such a rich field for engaging with the text. What we have attempted in a very preliminary way in this essay is to turn to theatre practices for help, to translate back from the stage to the page. Either way, the joy of Shakespeare is that whether actor or critic, you make discoveries all the time, and meaning in these characters is never resolved.

## NOTES

1. The work of Diane Macdonnell, *Theories of Discourse* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), of Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), and of Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces in Gendered Locations* (London: Routledge, 1995), respectively outline recent critiques of essentialist notions of character. For Shakespeare studies the work of Catherine Belsey attends to all the areas, and her *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1985) has generated the most comprehensive rethinking of the category of character in the plays.
2. Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, 'The Materiality of the "Shakespearean Text"', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 44 (1993), 267. For a comprehensive critique of essentialist approaches to character in studies of *Romeo and Juliet*, which draws largely on the tradition following A. C. Bradley's *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London, 1905), but which also looks at earlier

critics such as Mrs Jameson's *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1832) whose overlap of theatrical and textual elements tends to produce an apparently naive account of motivation, see Fleur Rothschild, *Recovering 'Romeo and Juliet', A Study of Critical Responses to the Play from 1597* (University of London doctorate, 1997).

3. See, for example, Harry Berger, 'What did the King know and when did he know it? Shakespearean Discourses and Psychoanalysis', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 88 (1989), 811–62. See also R. Cloud, 'What's the Bastard's Name?', in *Shakespeare's Speech-Headings: Speaking the Speech in Shakespeare's Plays*, ed. G. Walton Williams (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), p. 135.

4. For example, the production from the Lyric Hammersmith, in 1995, did precisely this.

5. See for example Kathleen Irace, *Reforming the 'Bad' Quartos: Performance and Provenance of Six Shakespearean First Editions* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994).

6. See Patsy Rodenburg, *The Need for Words* (London: Methuen, 1993), p. 148, where she claims that 'Breathing is speaking'.

7. John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1984). He notes that 'the language is the character', p. 59.

8. This is akin to what Patsy Rodenburg calls 'owning' a text by letting it take root in us. See *The Actor Speaks* (London: Methuen, 1997), pp. 210–11.

9. Cicely Berry, *The Actor and his Text* (London: Virgin, 1987), pp. 104–05.

10. The concept of acting in the moment is described in Barton, *Playing Shakespeare*, p. 50.

11. The sense of 'inhabiting' the text here is close to Berry's 'attending to the word' which she describes as feeling 'the energy and texture of each word complete and fulfilled before you allow yourself to go on to the next' (*The Actor and his Text*, p. 158).

12. All line references to *Romeo and Juliet* that are quoted in the essay are taken from Brian Gibbons' Arden edition (London: Routledge, 1980): act and scene numbers are not repeated after the first designation.

13. See Kristin Linklater, *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), p. 145.

14. For example, Berry, *The Actor and his Text*, pp. 95–98.

15. There is considerable debate about the effects of this exercise. See, for example, Linklater who says that 'vibrations of consonants travel through skin and muscle and bone to the senses, while vowels have direct access to the solar plexus, making them more immediately emotional', (*Freeing Shakespeare's Voice*, p. 19). In contrast, Berry notes the different

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effects of the sounds in terms of the patterning found in the vowels and the  
'muscular strength' of the consonants (*The Actor and his Text*, p. 152).  
Rodenburg suggests that vowels open one up to emotion (*The Need for*  
*Words*, p. 192).

16. Although potentially reductive, the effect of punctuation on verse-  
speaking is described clearly in Linklater, *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice*, p. 48.

17. As Barton suggests, equal sharing of lines indicates quite a different  
rhythm and relationship than short lines which suggest a pause between  
each speech (*Playing Shakespeare*, p. 152).

18. For an eloquent account of the problem of set-speeches and the  
'boredom' quotient, see Barton, *Playing Shakespeare*, pp. 86-87.

19. Sexuality of course is not a characteristic of a 'good' woman in  
Western culture.

20. The first reference to this effect comes from B. Cardullo, 'The  
Nurse's Delay in *Romeo and Juliet*', *CEA Critic, College English Association*,  
1983, Vol. 46, Pt 1-2, pp. 30-31.

21. This has to do with bodily 'readiness' as described by Rodenburg,  
*The Actor Speaks*, p. 8.

22. Rhyming couplets function partly by indicating the control that the  
character has over what has happened in the scene, see Barton, *Playing*  
*Shakespeare*, p. 157.

23. Linklater discusses the way that characters with speech that rhymes  
must be assumed to have the wit to exploit and manipulate meaning (*Freeing*  
*Shakespeare's Voice*, p. 150).

24. The Nurse uses exactly the same vocabulary for Tybalt that she had  
for Romeo in the earlier scene, calling him courteous and an 'honest  
gentleman', 'the best friend I had' (III.ii.61).

25. See Barton, who says 'It's a great trap with Shakespeare's text if you  
get on to one note, one tone and one tempo', and the actor always has to  
look within the text for variety (*Playing Shakespeare*, p. 51).

26. Rodenburg comments that 'a finely wrought text will have these  
changes and rhythm shifts built into it' (*The Actor Speaks*, p. 170).

27. Rodenburg notes that 'the lower we breathe a word, the deeper its  
effect on us' (*The Need for Words*, p. 150).