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Romeo and Juliet and its Afterlife

EDITED BY
STANLEY WELLS

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THE CHALLENGES OF *ROMEO AND JULIET*

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The story of Romeo and Juliet – one of the great myths of the Western world – first appeared fully formed in an Italian version of 1530, and since then has had a vigorous afterlife, not all of it deriving from Shakespeare. It has been frequently reincarnated and recollected in a multitude of forms and media – prose narratives, verse narratives, drama, opera, orchestral and choral music, ballet, film, television and painting among them. Besides being presented seriously it has been parodied and burlesqued; there are several full-scale nineteenth-century travesties of Shakespeare's play,¹ and its balcony scene in particular has often formed the basis for comic sketches. Romeo is a type name for an ardent lover, and Juliet's 'Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?' is often jocularly declaimed even by people who have never read or seen the play.

Already when, around 1594, Shakespeare decided to base a play on the story, he was able to consult more than one version. He worked closely from *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, by Arthur Brooke (who, like the hero and heroine of the story, himself died young), first published in 1562 and reprinted in 1587. Brooke had used a moralistic French adaptation, by Pierre Boaistuau, of a story by the Italian Matteo Bandello, and Shakespeare probably also read William Painter's translation of Boaistuau in his *Palace of Pleasure*, of 1567.

Brooke's style is, to say the best, uninspired, but he provided Shakespeare with both a well laid-out story and much valuable detail. Brooke

treated the events as historical, ending his poem with the statement that

The bodies dead removed from vault where they
did die
In stately tomb on pillars great of marble raise they
high.
On every side above were set and eke beneath
Great store of cunning epitaphs in honour of their
death.
And even at this day the tomb is to be seen,
So that among the monuments that in Verona
been
There is no monument more worthy of the sight
Than is the tomb of Juliet, and Romeus her
knight.

These lines clearly influenced the end of Shakespeare's play, in which the effect of the lovers' deaths is to some extent alleviated by the consequent reconciliation of their feuding families; and the alleged historicity of the tale continues to be of value to the Veronese tourist industry.

For most people at the present time Shakespeare's play embodies the classic version of the story. But, although it is widely read and frequently performed, it has itself undergone adaptation, sometimes slight, sometimes substantial, in ways that are implicitly critical of the

¹ Nineteenth-century burlesques and travesties are reprinted in *Shakespeare Burlesques*, ed. Stanley Wells, 5 vols. (London, 1977). One of the best is Andrew Halliday's *Romeo and Juliet Travestie, or, The Cup of Cold Poison*, first performed in 1859, in which Romeo and Juliet catch cold in the balcony scene: 'Swear not by the boon – the inconstant boon'.

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original. The play's ending has proved especially subject to alteration. In a lost version by James Howard performed shortly after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the tragedy was endowed with a happy ending (or perhaps one should say an even happier ending: one of my old professors, responding to a lady who said, after seeing a performance of Shakespeare's play, that she wished it ended happily, mischievously asked 'O, don't you think it does?') The result was that (as the prompter Downes wrote) 'when the tragedy was revived again 'twas played alternately, tragical one day and tragicomical another for several days altogether'.² Not long after this, in 1680, Thomas Otway wrote a new play, *Caius Marius*, borrowing much of Shakespeare's dialogue. Apparently Otway was dissatisfied with Shakespeare's conclusion, in which Romeo dies before Juliet recovers from the sleeping potion given to her by the Friar. Otway, clearly – and perhaps rightly – thinking that Shakespeare had missed a good opportunity for an affecting passage of dialogue, conceived the notion of causing his heroine to wake before her lover expired, and gave them a touching duologue. When Theophilus Cibber came to adapt Shakespeare's play, in 1744, he incorporated passages from Otway, including the death scene, with only minor changes, and around the same time David Garrick, in a version that follows Shakespeare's text more closely, nevertheless seized upon Otway's basic idea, while writing a new duologue for the lovers in which they go successively mad. This was accepted into the theatrical tradition, and although the American Charlotte Cushman (playing Romeo) returned to Shakespeare in the mid-nineteenth century, Garrick's version appears not to have been completely abandoned until Henry Irving put on the play in 1882.

Garrick's death scene is easily guyed: 'Bless me! how cold it is!' says Juliet on waking, and later, 'And did I wake for this!'; yet Francis Gentleman, writing in 1770, praised it highly: 'no play ever received greater advantage from

alteration than this tragedy, especially in the last act; bringing Juliet to life before Romeo dies, is undoubtedly a change of infinite merit. The whole dying scene does Mr Garrick great credit.'³ In its day, and for long afterwards, it must have been highly actable – and it gave the performer of Romeo a stronger death scene than Shakespeare had provided. Bernard Shaw, writing in 1894, described his first experience of the play, 'in which Romeo, instead of dying forthwith when he took the poison, was interrupted by Juliet, who sat up and made him carry her down to the footlights, where she complained of being very cold, and had to be warmed by a love scene, in the middle of which Romeo, who had forgotten all about the poison, was taken ill and died'.⁴ No modern director would be likely to interpolate Garrick's words into Shakespeare's text, but in more than one production the terrible irony of the situation has been pointed by Juliet's showing signs of life as Romeo dies which are visible to the audience though not to him.⁵

In the twentieth century English-speaking productions have at least taken Shakespeare's original text as their point of departure, though the dénouement was radically altered in one of Stratford's more iconoclastic versions, the one directed by Michael Bogdanov in 1986. This modern-dress production came to be known as the *Alfa-Romeo and Juliet* because of the presence on stage during part of the action of a bright red

² John Downes, *Roscius Anglicanus* (London, 1708; Facsimile Reprint, Augustan Reprint Society no. 134, Los Angeles, 1969), sig. C3v.

³ Cited in G. C. D. Odell, *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving*, 2 vols. (New York, 1920), 1.347.

⁴ From an article called 'The Religion of the Pianoforte' (*The Fortnightly Review*, February 1894), reprinted in part in *Shaw on Shakespeare*, edited by Edwin Wilson (London, 1962), p. 246.

⁵ See for example Peter Holding, *Romeo and Juliet: Text and Performance* (London, 1992), pp. 61–2 for a description of the scene in a 1976 Stratford production directed by Trevor Nunn and Barry Kyle. In Adrian Noble's 1995 Stratford production, too, Juliet showed signs of life before Romeo died.

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sports car. Characteristically of this director, it had a strong political slant which manifested itself especially in his handling of the ending. Academic critics have suggested that when Montague and Capulet say that they will 'raise the lovers' statues in pure gold' they are revealing false, materialistic values.⁶ Bogdanov translated this suggestion into theatrical terms. His text came to a halt with Juliet's death; the dead lovers were covered with golden cloths and then, during a brief blackout, they sprang to attention and stood as their own statues; the final episode became a wordless media event, as reporters and photographers flooded the scene, the survivors posed in attitudes suggestive rather of a desire to have their photographs published in *Hello!* magazine than of either true grief or reconciliation, and the Prince spoke part of the prologue – omitted at the start – transposed to the past tense.

In this essay I want to concentrate on the text as it has come down to us in editions based normally on the 'good' Quarto of 1599 (though often incorporating stage directions, and occasionally other readings, from the 'bad' Quarto of two years before) and on some of the challenges faced by directors who try to translate this text into terms of modern theatre. I do not intend to be judgemental about this text; indeed, I shall deliberately refrain from expressing my own opinions about its theatrical viability. Theatre history clearly shows that lines, speeches, whole episodes that were unacceptable in other ages, and in other theatres than those of today, have been restored to theatrical life in more recent productions. Even so, the programme for Adrian Noble's, in 1995, admitted to the omission of about 564 lines – getting on for twenty per cent of the complete text. That presumably represented Noble's judgement of what could be made to work by his particular actors in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre before the audiences going to that theatre in the theatrical conditions pertaining in 1995. It did not, I take it, claim to present an absolute judgement on the text's theatrical vi-

ability. Different textual cuts might be made in different circumstances even at the present time; it will be interesting to see if a full text will be presented in the new Globe, and if so, how it will work.

As I have said, twentieth-century productions, at least since John Gielgud's of 1935, in which he and Laurence Olivier successively played Romeo and Mercutio, and which also had Peggy Ashcroft as Juliet and Edith Evans as the Nurse, have tended to play fuller and purer texts than those of earlier ages; the BBC radio production by the Renaissance Theatre Company, available on audio cassette, uses a full text, but that is a special case, and it has to be admitted that even in our time some of the most theatrically exciting productions, including those of Peter Brook at Stratford in 1947 and Franco Zeffirelli at the Old Vic in 1960, have cut and otherwise altered the text extensively, presenting their vision of it in terms of the theatre of their time rather than offering text-centred performances. Indeed, both the directors I have named explicitly rejected engagement with the text's literary values; Brook declared that 'To come to the theatre merely to listen to the words was the last decadence', and Zeffirelli is reported to have 'said repeatedly that he had no use for [the play's] verse'.⁷ And even directors who have been less radical in their treatment of the text than Brook and Bogdanov have made extensive cuts. Later I shall try to identify some of the main areas that have presented problems, and to suggest some reasons why they have done so.

The modern director's task is complicated by the fact that, since Shakespeare wrote, the story of the fated lovers has attracted many other

⁶ For example, Marjorie Garber, 'Romeo and Juliet: Patterns and Paradigms', in *The Shakespeare Plays: A Study Guide* (San Diego, 1979), pp. 50–63; reprinted in 'Romeo and Juliet': *Critical Essays*, edited by John F. Andrews (New York and London, 1993), pp. 119–31; p. 131. See also Susan Snyder, p. 96, below.

⁷ Jill L. Levenson, 'Romeo and Juliet': *Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester, 1987), pp. 66 and 97.

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creative artists, some of whom have drawn exclusively on Shakespeare, some on other versions of the tale, and others who have mixed the traditions. There is no reason, for instance, to suppose that Tchaikovsky went beyond Shakespeare for his immensely popular fantasy overture of 1869 (later revised), or Prokofiev and his choreographers for their ballet, first performed in 1938; on the other hand, Bellini's opera *I Capuleti ed i Montecchi* (1830) appears to owe nothing to Shakespeare (though its double death scene bears a suspicious resemblance to Garrick's), and the librettists of the only other successful opera based on the story, Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* (1867), incorporated Garrick's tomb scene into their work, as does Berlioz (wordlessly) in his dramatic symphony of 1839.

The existence and popularity of symphonic, operatic, balletic, filmic, and other offshoots is relevant to the performance history of the play itself because they create images that superimpose themselves on the Shakespearian text, forming expectations in the imaginations of the play's interpreters and audiences which subtly affect our response to efforts to translate that text into performance. In the wonderful *scène d'amour* in Berlioz's work, long-breathed phrases accompanied by rhythmical pulsations speak eloquently of passionate yearning in a manner that would not lead listeners to expect the humour that also lies latent in Shakespeare's dialogue; and Berlioz's musical depiction of the gradual dispersal of the masquers into the night, apparently strumming their guitars and humming snatches of half-remembered song, is not only theatrical as well as musical in its effect but appeared to be reflected, whether consciously or not, in one of the more sensitively directed episodes of Michael Bogdanov's production with the dying away of the sounds of motor bikes as revellers left the Capulets' ball. In a different way, the long tradition of scenically spectacular productions, aided and abetted by the popularity of Zeffirelli's film (discussed in later essays in this volume), with its beautiful

Tuscan settings, may lead theatregoers to expect visual splendours.

Also relevant to modern theatrical interpretations is the play's complex literary background. Although the often incandescent quality of its verse is responsible for much of the admiration that the play has evoked, at the same time its self-conscious literariness has repeatedly been implicitly or explicitly criticized as detrimental to its theatrical effectiveness. 'It is a dramatic poem rather than a drama', wrote Henry Irving, 'and I mean to treat it from that point of view.'⁸ For all that, he omitted a lot of its poetry while succeeding, according to Henry James, only in making 'this enchanting poem' 'dull ... mortally slow' and 'tame' by 'smothering' it 'in its accessories'.⁹ The history of critical and theatrical reactions to the play demonstrates the fact that Shakespeare worked in a far more literary mode than has been fashionable in the theatre of later ages, and that its literariness has often been regarded as a theatrical handicap.

In a memorable tribute, T. J. B. Spencer wrote that 'Nothing in European drama had hitherto achieved the organisation of so much human experience when Shakespeare, at the age of about thirty, undertook the story of Juliet and Romeo.'¹⁰ The manner in which the play organizes experience is highly self-conscious and deeply indebted to a variety of literary traditions. Many devices of parallelism and repetition create an almost architectural sense of structure. This structure is defined by the appearances of the Prince of Verona. Some productions bring him on to speak the Prologue, appropriately enough since his three appearances within the action have something

⁸ Cited in Alan Hughes, *Henry Irving, Shakespearean* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 160.

⁹ Henry James, in an article, 'London Plays', originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1882, and reprinted in *The Scenic Art*, edited by Allan Wade (London, 1949), pp. 162-7; p. 164.

¹⁰ T. J. B. Spencer, ed., *Romeo and Juliet*, New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth, 1967 etc.), p. 7.

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of a choric function. We first see him in his own right as he enters to exercise his authority at the height of the brawl between the followers of Montague and Capulet in the opening scene; he makes one formal though impassioned speech, and his departure marks a turning point from the public to the private action of the play as Benvolio, after recapitulating what has happened in lines that are usually abbreviated, describes the symptoms of Romeo's love-sickness for Rosaline. The Prince's second appearance comes at the climax of the play's second violent episode, culminating in the killing of Tybalt and Mercutio, which provokes him to another display of authority as he banishes Romeo, the principal turning point of the action; and he reappears in the final scene to preside over the investigation into the lovers' deaths and to apportion responsibility. His are the closing lines which round off the play, returning it to the condition of myth:

For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

The formality evident in the appearances of the Prince recurs in many other aspects of the play's design. Shakespeare is still sometimes regarded as an inspired improviser, and perhaps in some plays he was, but it is impossible not to feel that before he started to write the dialogue of this play he worked out a ground plan as carefully as if he had been designing an intricate building. One could point, for example, to the parallels in function between Mercutio and the Nurse, both of whom are almost entirely of Shakespeare's creation: he a companion and foil to Romeo, she to Juliet, he consciously mocking Romeo's romanticism with high-spirited, bawdy cynicism, she no less earthy but less aware of the sexual implications of much of what she says, each of them involuntarily failing their companion in their greatest need, he through his accidental death which turns the play from a romantic comedy into a tragedy, she because of the limitations in her understanding of the depths of Juliet's love which

leave Juliet to face her fate alone. There are parallels too in the design of scenes: the Capulets' bustling preparations for the ball (1.5) are echoed in those for Juliet's marriage to Paris (4.4); and each of the play's three love duets – one in the evening, at the ball, the second at night, in the garden and on its overlooking balcony, the third at dawn, as the lovers, now married, prepare to part – is interrupted by calls from the Nurse.

These features of the play's structure create an impression of highly patterned formality; they may be regarded as dramatic strengths; and in any case a director can scarcely avoid them without rewriting the play, but there are others that have often suffered under the blue pencil. For example, at a number of points characters recapitulate action that has already been enacted before us. In the opening scene, Benvolio spends ten lines satirically describing Tybalt's intervention in the fray between the servants of the Montagues and Capulets; later, after the fight in which both Mercutio and Tybalt are killed, Benvolio again recapitulates what has happened, this time in twenty-three lines of verse; and in the closing scene the Friar, notoriously, after claiming 'I will be brief', recapitulates the full story of the lovers in one of the longest speeches of a play that is not short of long speeches. 'It is much to be lamented' wrote Johnson, 'that the poet did not conclude the dialogue with the action, and avoid a narrative of events which the audience already knew.'¹¹

This technique of recapitulation can be, and has been, defended; for example, Bertrand Evans remarks that, 'far from being a repetitious exercise best deleted on the stage, the Friar's speech is an indispensable part of the total experience of the tragedy; not to be present when some key participants learn how their acts resulted in the pile of bodies in the Capulet

¹¹ *Johnson on Shakespeare*, edited by Arthur Sherbo, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven, 1968), vol. 8, p. 976.

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tomb – Romeo’s, Juliet’s, Tybalt’s, Paris’s – would be to miss too much’.¹² Certainly these speeches constitute a challenge that should be accepted by directors concerned to present the text in its integrity; for the actors, I take it, the challenge is to seek out a psychological subtext that will help them to deliver the lines not merely as a summary of what has gone before but as utterances emanating naturally and spontaneously from the characters as they have conceived it. Performers of Benvolio can portray his summaries of the action as the reactions of a well-meaning but puzzled man desperately attempting to make sense of what has happened; the Friar’s long speech has been played in more than one production less as a judicial apportioning of blame (which it unequivocally is in Berlioz, where the role of the Friar encompasses some of the functions of Shakespeare’s Prince) than as the frightened reactions of a man who fears he has betrayed his responsibility; the reactions of the other onstage characters as he reveals the secrets, previously unknown to them, of the marriage and the potion are no less important than his own state of mind as he speaks. Nevertheless the speech has been implicitly criticized by directors concerned to streamline the action; Peter Brook and Michael Bogdanov omitted it altogether,¹³ and all twelve of the Stratford productions since Brook’s have shortened it, some considerably.

The deliberation of the play’s structure is of a piece with its self-conscious, even ostentatious literariness and intellectualism. ‘Now is he for the numbers that Petrarch flowed in. Laura, to his lady, was a kitchen wench’, says Mercutio of Romeo whom he believes to be still in love with the ‘pale, hard hearted wench’ Rosaline, as if to draw attention to Shakespeare’s indebtedness to the Petrarchan tradition, well established in England at the time he was writing, of the besotted lover sighing in vain for an unresponsive beloved – a situation that he was to dramatize directly in the figures of Silvius and Phoebe in *As You Like It* and that is also related to that of the chaste young man with no interest

in ensuring his own posterity who is addressed in the first seventeen of Shakespeare’s sonnets. The explicit reference to a major literary influence on the play – also omitted in most modern performances – is a counterpart to the appearance on stage of a volume of Ovid in *Titus Andronicus*.

The literary form most strongly associated with Petrarchism was the sonnet. The Argument to Brooke’s poem is in sonnet form, and *Romeo and Juliet*, written during the ten or so years when the amatory sonnet cycle was enjoying a vogue greater than ever before or since, makes direct use of the complete form in the Prologue, in the rarely performed Chorus to Act 2, and, famously, in the shared sonnet spoken between the lovers on their first meeting. At a number of other points, too, such as the speech by the Prince that ends the play, Shakespeare uses the six-line rhyming unit ending in a couplet that forms the final part of the sonnet form as used by Shakespeare and which is also the stanza form of his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, of 1593. Other well established literary conventions, less obvious to the modern playgoer, that influence the play include the epithalamium, reflected in Juliet’s great speech beginning ‘Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds’, and the dawn-parting, or ‘alba’ – one of the most universal of poetic themes – which provides the basic structure for the entire scene of dawn-parting between Romeo and Juliet.¹⁴

¹² Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Practice* (Oxford, 1979), p. 51.

¹³ Judging by the prompt book held in the Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon, Brook originally omitted all the text after Juliet’s death (like Bogdanov after him) except for the addition of ‘Brother Montague give me thy hand’ from Capulet and the Prince’s concluding six lines spoken by the Chorus, but restored some of the omitted dialogue, including part of the Friar’s long speech, in later performances.

¹⁴ The theme is studied in its multiple international manifestations in *Eros: An Enquiry into the Theme of Lovers’ Meetings and Partings at Dawn in Poetry*, edited by Arthur T. Hatto (London, The Hague, Paris, 1965); the

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The play's creative use of conventions of lyric poetry is responsible for much of its enduring popularity as perhaps the greatest of all expressions of romantic love; it is complemented and to some extent counterbalanced by an intellectualism manifesting itself especially in complex wordplay that has stood the passage of time less well and has often been censured (and, in recent times, defended) by literary critics as well as being subjected to the more practical criticism of being excised from acting texts. David Garrick, in the Advertisement to his 1748 adaptation, states his 'design . . . to clear the original as much as possible from the jingle and quibble which were always thought the great objections to reviving it'. 'Jingle' refers to Shakespeare's extensive use of rhyme, regarded by neo-classical critics as indecorous in tragedy; Garrick's modifications – which included reducing the sonnet form of the lovers' declaration to two quatrains – reduced the play's range of poetic style.

'Quibble' is, if anything, even more integral than rhyme to the effect of the play as Shakespeare wrote it. Wordplay extends from the bawdy of the servants' comic opening dialogue, through the self-conscious jesting of Mercutio and the often involuntary *double entendres* of the Nurse, up to passages of quibbling wordplay spoken in wholly serious, even tragic circumstances by Romeo and Juliet themselves. Modern performers and audiences have been educated into an easier acceptance of wordplay than Garrick, partly as a result of its serious use in post-Freudian literature, above all by James Joyce (whose 'stream of consciousness' technique is anticipated by the Nurse), and also by studies encouraging an historical awareness of its prevalence in uncomic writings by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, such as John Donne. Even so, cuts made in acting versions of the present day suggest that the quibble is still more easily regarded as an ingredient of comedy than as a vehicle of tragic effect. This springs, perhaps, from too limited a notion both of what Shakespeare may encompass within the port-

manteau definition of tragedy, and of the language appropriate to the form – if, indeed, it can properly be called a form. It has often been observed that for much of its considerable length *Romeo and Juliet* – especially if, as in Bogdanov's production, the Prologue is omitted – comes closer to our expectations of romantic comedy than of such a tragedy as the one that immediately precedes it in Shakespeare's output, *Titus Andronicus*, to which *Romeo and Juliet* might be regarded as a deliberately contrasting companion piece. If directors are to realize this script in its full richness they need to free themselves of the conventional connotations of tragedy and to play each episode in its own terms. And if audiences are to meet Shakespeare on his own terms they must find room in their responses not only for the direct if poetically heightened expression of heartfelt emotion that has caused the balcony scene to be valued as perhaps the most eloquent of all depictions of romantic love, but also for the contrived artificiality with which Shakespeare endows even the lovers' language at some of the most impassioned points of the play's action. This is not only a 'most excellent and lamentable tragedy', as the title page of the 1599 quarto puts it, it is also, in the terms of the title page of the 'bad' quarto of 1597, 'an excellent conceited tragedy' – which I suppose might be paraphrased as a tragedy notable for the ingenuity of its verbal expression. Under the surface of the play's poetry lies a complicated network of rhetorical figures (examined in Jill Levenson's essay, pp. 44–55) that are rarely recognized by even the more erudite among the play's modern readers. This poses great problems for the actors, as Bernard Shaw recognized when he wrote 'It should never be forgotten in judging an attempt to play Romeo and Juliet that the parts are made almost impossible except to actors of positive genius, skilled to the last degree in metrical declama-

section on English, by T. J. B. Spencer, includes discussion of Shakespeare's use of the motif.

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tion, by the way in which the poetry, magnificent as it is, is interlarded by the miserable rhetoric and silly lyrical conceits which were the foible of the Elizabethans.¹⁵ The conceit with which Juliet imagines her and her lover's fate after death, with its hidden wordplay on the sexual sense of 'die', is as extreme as anything in metaphysical poetry:

when I shall die
[or 'he shall die', according to the unauthoritative
fourth quarto and some later editors]
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun. (3.2.21-5)

Even more difficult, I take it, are the play's several extended passages of dialogue in which characters are required, on the basis of misunderstanding or of false information, to act out emotions that, as the audience knows, the true situation does not justify. One such passage comes just after the lines I have quoted. Juliet's Nurse enters with the cords designed to make a rope ladder to give Romeo access to Juliet at night. 'Wringing her hands', as the bad quarto's direction and the good quarto's dialogue tell us, she bemoans Tybalt's death, of which Juliet has not heard, but in such a way that Juliet thinks Romeo, not Tybalt, is dead. In a sense the episode is an extended piece of wordplay on the pronoun 'he':

Ah, welladay! He's dead, he's dead, he's dead!
We are undone, lady, we are undone.
Alack the day, he's gone, he's killed, he's dead!
(3.2.37-9)

So says the Nurse, speaking of Tybalt, but Juliet takes her to refer to Romeo, and even when the Nurse speaks directly of Romeo –

O Romeo, Romeo,
Who ever would have thought it Romeo?
(3.2.41-2)

Juliet takes her to mean that Romeo is the victim, not the killer. The misunderstanding continues through a long episode in which Juliet again resorts to complex wordplay:

Hath Romeo slain himself? Say thou but 'Ay',
And that bare vowel 'I' shall poison more
Than the death-darting eye of cockatrice.
I am not I if there be such an 'Ay',
Or those eyes shut that makes thee answer 'Ay'.
If he be slain, say 'Ay'; or if not, 'No'.
Brief sounds determine of my weal or woe.
(3.2.45-51)

Not until the Nurse resorts to plain statement is the misunderstanding clarified:

Tybalt is gone and Romeo banishèd.
Romeo that killed him – he is banishèd.
(3.2.69-70)

And even then Juliet launches into a highly mannered lament, full of the oxymorons that are a conspicuous feature of this play's style. This scene has regularly been abbreviated in post-war Stratford productions, every one of which has omitted or shortened the wordplay on 'I', and most of which have abbreviated the oxymorons.

The artifice both of situation and of style in this scene is bound to have a distancing effect; it displays wit on the part of both Shakespeare and Juliet, yet for Juliet the situation is tragic. She needs to speak her lines with a high degree of intellectual control which may seem at odds with the spontaneous expression of deeply felt emotion. But perhaps this is the point: M. M. Mahood regards the puns on 'I' as 'one of Shakespeare's first attempts to reveal a profound disturbance of mind by the use of quibbles'¹⁶ and Jill Levenson too regards Juliet's withdrawal from emotional expression as psychologically plausible: 'Juliet's prothalamium quickly shrinks to mere word-play and sound effects as she glimpses calamity in the Nurse's report, the swift reduction implying that absolute grief has arrested Juliet's imagination.'¹⁷ Those are, I

¹⁵ From a review of Forbes-Robertson's production, *The Saturday Review*, 28 September 1895; reprinted in *Shaw on Shakespeare*, pp. 168-74; p. 173.

¹⁶ M. M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London, 1968), p. 70.

¹⁷ Levenson, *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 7.