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ONLINE REVISION

MR BRUFF'S
GUIDE TO

'ROMEO AND JULIET'



The complete play
with line by line
translation &
analysis

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SAMPLE

CHARACTER ANALYSIS: THE NURSE

At first glance, it's easy to dismiss the nurse as simply one of Shakespeare's comic characters to lighten the mood in the play. And there's some truth to that statement: Shakespeare does arguably give the nurse the funniest lines in 'Romeo and Juliet'. But aside from the comedy, there is so much more to Shakespeare's presentation of this character.

The audience first meets the nurse in Act 1, Scene 3. This is the scene where Lady Capulet, Juliet and Nurse talk about Paris. It starts out comically, with Nurse telling a long story about Juliet's childhood. Lady Capulet reproaches Nurse, telling her 'Enough of this; I pray thee hold thy peace'... and then Nurse repeats her story.

Despite the comedy, it's an important moment in which we learn of the close relationship between Juliet and her nurse. We see this from the opening line of the scene where Lady Capulet asks 'Nurse, where's my daughter?'. Lady Capulet doesn't know where her daughter is, but the nurse does. When Lady Capulet asks Nurse to leave the room, explaining that she wishes to speak to her daughter 'in secret', she quickly changes her mind and says 'Nurse, come back again: / I have remember'd me; thou's hear our counsel'. These words inform the audience that Lady Capulet feels that she cannot have such an intimate conversation without the nurse being present, implying both that there is a distance between mother and child, and a closeness between Juliet and her nurse.

The nurse explains that, when it comes to Juliet, she 'can tell her age unto an hour'. This suggests that the nurse was present for Juliet's birth. This closeness of relationship is understood further when we learn that the nurse was the wet nurse for Juliet. A wet nurse is someone who breastfeeds the child of someone else. Crucial to our analysis, a wet nurse in Elizabethan England would have been a woman of lower class, employed to feed the child of a higher-class family. We learn that the nurse had her own daughter, Susan, who died, and Nurse took on the role of wet nurse for Juliet. The presence of a wet nurse was common in rich families in Elizabethan England, but they would only be employed until the baby was weaned. In the play, Nurse has stayed on as a carer for Juliet, who is now thirteen years old. Nurse's daughter is dead ('Susan is with God'). Nurse's husband is dead, ('my husband—God be with his soul'), and her life is completely centred on Juliet. Nurse's happiness revolves around Juliet—she says in Act 1, Scene 3 'An I might live to see thee married once, / I have my wish'.

So, Nurse is of lower-class social status, but what is so intriguing is Shakespeare's use of blank verse for her in this scene.

Shakespeare essentially uses three different types of speech for characters: blank verse, prose, and rhymed verse.

- **Blank verse** is iambic pentameter that does not rhyme. It has lines of ten syllables, with alternating unstressed and stressed syllables. In your copy of the play, blank verse looks like poetry written out on the page.
- **Prose** is ordinary written language—there is no rhyme scheme or specific metrical structure. In your copy of the play, prose looks like ordinary written sentences and paragraphs.
- **Rhymed verse** is, unsurprisingly, lines of verse which rhyme. It might be iambic pentameter, or it might be another rhyme scheme, such as the trochaic tetrameter spoken by the witches

in 'Macbeth'. Shakespeare also used rhyming couplets (two lines that rhyme, often in iambic pentameter) to signal the end of a scene. Again, it looks like poetry on the page.

Before we look in detail at Nurse's dialogue, let's briefly consider who the audience has met up until this point:

In Act 1, Scene 1, the banter between Sampson and Gregory, and their argument with Abraham and Balthasar, is all in prose—ordinary written language with no rhyme scheme or specific metrical structure. Usually, prose is given to characters of low social status, or those engaged in comic scenes. The opening of Act 1, Scene 1 contains both: Sampson, Gregory, Abraham and Balthasar are all servants, so their lower-class status dictates the use of prose. However, there's also a lot of comedy and wordplay in these exchanges, so again that would fit the use of prose. There are other occasions when prose is used in Shakespeare plays, but low social status and comic moments are the most common causes in 'Romeo and Juliet'.

The first character the audience meets who does not speak in prose is Benvolio, and Shakespeare uses blank verse for this character. Blank verse is typically used by upper-class characters and the nobility. Here, Benvolio's use of blank verse indicates his higher social status than the other characters. This is something we know from the cast list on page one, which tell us that Benvolio is Montague's nephew. Sometimes, an upper-class character might switch to prose, such as when Benvolio and Mercutio are joking with each other in Act 3, Scene 1, but we rarely see a low status character speaking in verse. And yet that's exactly what we see with the nurse in Act 1, Scene 3.

Just like Juliet and Lady Capulet, Shakespeare uses blank verse for the nurse's dialogue in Act 1, Scene 3. There are times later in the play when she drops into prose, like when she jokes with Juliet, but it is significant that the first time we meet her, she is speaking in blank verse. And the question is, why? Why would Shakespeare use blank verse for a lower-class character? Well for one, Shakespeare is highlighting how the nurse's character is significant—not to be written off as simply a source of comic relief. The nurse, or more specifically what she symbolises in the play (which we'll get to), is important. We are not supposed to view her in the same way as, for example, Sampson and Gregory, who never appear in the play again after the opening scene. Secondly, perhaps Shakespeare is showing how Nurse transcends her status as a lower-class character, due to the closeness of her relationship with Juliet. Nurse is essentially a surrogate parent to Juliet, just like Friar Lawrence is to Romeo, and the blank verse symbolises this.

We can therefore conclude from Shakespeare's use of blank verse in Act 1, Scene 3 that the nurse is an important character. But what's so important about her? What does she symbolise? We can learn a great deal from Crystal Bartolovich in her piece "*First as Tragedy, then as...*": *Gender, Genre, History, and Romeo and Juliet*. To Bartolovich, the nurse represents nurturing and comedy:

NURTURING

Bartolovich points out how Nurse not only nurtures Juliet (as we've already explored), but she also nurtures the relationship between Romeo and Juliet. After meeting Romeo in Act 1, Scene 5, Juliet asks Nurse to identify him. Then in Act 2, Scene 4, Juliet confides in her nurse and sends her to meet Romeo. It is the nurse who takes the rope ladder needed for Romeo to ascend into Juliet's chamber (and the nurse sets it up in Act 3, Scene 2); it is the nurse who is sent to deliver a message and a ring to Romeo at Friar Lawrence's cell in Act 3, Scene 3, snatching away a dagger from Romeo who 'offers to stab himself' in the same scene; it is the nurse who warns Juliet in Act 3, Scene 5 that her mother is about to walk into her room and find Romeo with her; and it is the nurse who stands up to Capulet in the same scene, telling him 'You are to blame...to rate her so'. We therefore we see very clearly

that the nurse has a nurturing role, both nurturing Juliet but also the relationship between the two lovers.

COMEDY

Shakespeare gives Nurse the funniest lines in the play. Let's look at a few from Act 2.

In Act 2, Scene 4, perhaps sensing that the plot needs an emotional lift, Shakespeare introduces humour through Nurse's use of malapropisms. A malapropism is the misuse of a word for humorous effect. The word sounds similar to the correct word but has a very different meaning. When the nurse tells Romeo 'I will tell her, sir, that you do protest, which, as I take it, is a gentlemanlike offer', she makes an error in her use of the word 'protest'. What she meant to say was 'I will tell her that you propose, which is gentlemanlike offer'. As you can see, the undesired meaning is the opposite of what was meant—to tell Juliet that Romeo protests, means to tell Juliet that Romeo disapproves!

Another malapropism is seen when Nurse says 'if you be he, sir, I desire some confidence with you'. The word the nurse meant to use here was 'conference'. Benvolio notes the mistake, which is why he deliberately makes one himself in the next line, saying 'She will indite [instead of 'invite'] him to some supper'.

Act 2, Scene 5 is, in my view, the funniest part of the play. Nurse returns to Juliet, who is desperate to know what Romeo has said. The audience knows that Romeo has proposed marriage, but the nurse drags it out in lines like this:

NURSE

Your love says, like an honest gentleman, and a courteous, and a kind, and a handsome, and, I warrant, a virtuous – Where is your mother?

JULIET

Where is my mother? Why, she is within.
Where should she be? How oddly thou repliest:
"Your love says, like an honest gentleman,
Where is your mother?"

What's happening here is the nurse is deliberately teasing Juliet by dragging out the news of Romeo's proposal. Notice the switch to prose for the nurse, to signify the comic nature of the moment.

So, as well as being nurturing, Nurse is also highly comic.

We also see that the relationship between Juliet and her nurse suffers as the play progresses: Nurse cannot understand how Juliet still sides with Romeo even after he has killed Tybalt, asking in Act 3, Scene 2 'Will you speak well of him that killed your cousin?' Juliet is enraged when Nurse suggests she marry Paris after all, calling Nurse 'O most wicked fiend!'. Juliet, who doted on her nurse at the start of the play, is becoming a woman and moving beyond such childish things as needing what is essentially a full-time babysitter. As a result, she is starting to distance herself from the people she associates with childhood. And of course, this distancing is seen literally when Juliet sends Nurse away from her chamber on the night that she fakes her own death in Act 4, Scene 3, telling her 'I pray thee leave me to myself tonight'.

Even though the relationship between Nurse and Juliet weakens as the play progresses, Nurse is still a hugely significant character. Aside from Romeo, Juliet and Friar Lawrence, Nurse has more

dialogue than anyone else in the play. It is therefore a surprise when we notice the nurse's absence in the final scene of 'Romeo and Juliet'.

The prologue tells us that Romeo and Juliet's death will 'bury their parents' strife'. At first glance, it does seem that the play ends on a positive note, with Montague pledging to create Juliet's 'statue in pure gold'. But is it really a case of *and they all lived happily ever after*? Professor Crystal Bartolovich explores the staging at the end of the play. In the final scene, who does the audience see onstage? The Act 5, Scene 3 stage directions tell us that there are over a dozen characters there: Paris, Page, Romeo, Balthasar, Friar Lawrence, Juliet, First Watchman, Second Watchman, Third Watchman, Prince Escalus, Attendants, Montague, Capulet, Lady Capulet and unnamed 'others'. So basically, we see almost everyone except the nurse.

In Shakespeare's play, Friar Lawrence explains 'to the marriage / her Nurse is privy', but why isn't Nurse there to explain her side of the story? Her absence at the end of the play is all the more notable, Bartolovich points out, because the Arthur Brooke poem 'Romeus and Juliet' from 1562 (and a text known as the principal source for Shakespeare's play) DOES mention the nurse at the end, telling us 'The nurse of Juliet is banished in her age'.

So, the ending of the play does contain some positive resolution: as the prologue told us, it does 'bury their parents' strife'. However, the absence of Nurse onstage reminds us that this is not the case for everyone—the nurse, and the nurturing and comedy she represents, has disappeared forever.

KEY QUOTATIONS

When it comes to key quotations and references for the nurse, there are two areas I want to focus on:

- 1) Her importance at the start of the play, representing nurturing and comedy.
- 2) Her absence at the end of the play, representing the nurturing and comedic attributes that are lost at the end of the play.

For this second point, you won't need a direct quote. You'll just want to reference how she is not on stage at the end of the play.

For the nurturing, you might use: 'Faith, I can tell her age unto an hour.'

And what you'll say about this quotation is firstly that it's an example of blank verse, which is usually the domain of upper-class and noble characters, and not the lower classes, signifying the importance of the nurse's character. And secondly, it's a quotation which shows how intimately Nurse knows Juliet, having been with her since her birth.

When it comes to comedy, there are lots of quotations you might use. Perhaps one of the malapropisms like: 'I will tell her, sir, that you do protest', where the correct word would be 'propose'.