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Autor(en): **Erne, Lukas**

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Romeo and Juliet on Stage and Page: The Character of the Nurse in the First (1597) and Second (1599) Quartos

Lukas Erne

From the very beginning, Shakespeare's plays existed on the page and on stage, in the literate, printed text as well as the oral, staged performance, which is why they are usefully examined from the angle of mediality. A case in point is *Romeo and Juliet*, of which two versions were published during Shakespeare's lifetime, the shorter, more theatrical first quarto (1597) and the longer, more literary second quarto (1599). An analysis of the character of the Nurse yields intriguing differences between the two versions, which are best understood not in terms of quality -- the "good quarto" versus the "bad quarto" – but as pertaining to the twin media in which the play circulated. This article thus suggests that mediality can make an important contribution to the current revival of interest in character in Shakespeare studies.

In literary studies, it may have seemed to many until not too long ago that character analysis had been thoroughly discredited but, more recently, it has become apparent that character is "an extraordinarily robust category of literary cognition and analysis" (Crewe 35). In Shakespeare studies, signs of this awareness are currently everywhere. R. A. Foakes, a leading Shakespearean and editor of the Arden *King Lear*, has published an article with the programmatic title "Reviving Shakespearean Character Criticism." In 2006, the important annual yearbook *Shakespeare Studies* devoted a forum to the question "Is There Character After Theory?", a rhetorical question to which contributors provided affirmative answers of various kinds, Christy Desmet, for instance, writing about "The Persistence of Character" and Jonathan Crewe about "Reclaiming Character" (Falco). In March 2008, a seminar at the conference of the Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) in Dallas was devoted to "Lady Macbeth's Children, Again: Or, The Return of Character Criti-

cism." This recent comeback is all the more surprising if we recall what Heather Dubrow wrote twenty years ago: "[C]haracter has virtually become a dirty word, quite as taboo in many circles as frank glosses on Shakespeare's sexual wordplay were to an earlier generation" (17).

Until recently, A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* of 1904 seemed representative of the limitations of a criticism that responded to characters as if they were human beings, limitations which, many believed, had become abundantly clear when L. C. Knights lampooned Bradley's approach in his article "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" and when F. R. Leavis described Bradley's approach as "sentimental perversity" (Caines 19). For much of the twentieth century, even those who disagreed at least agreed with each other that Bradley's novelistic view of character was wrong-headed. What we now call "Old Historicists" objected to Bradley since he failed to account for sixteenth and seventeenth-century dramatic conventions governing character, conventions which mean that characters talk to themselves in soliloquies, speak in blank verse, and are unable to penetrate the most obvious disguises. The New Critics' insistence on the plays as poems meant that they parted company with Bradley by searching for coherence on the level of imagery, not of character. The New Historicists disagreed with Bradley's approach to character by stressing that early modern people had fundamentally different kinds of identity and consciousness, identities shaped "by social role rather than subjectivity and interiority" (Sinfield 27). Similarly, certain post-structuralists necessarily disagreed with Bradley in believing that "*no one* really has a consistent inner core of being" and that "*any* identity is, and should be, decentered" (Sinfield 28). Yet, despite the fact that Bradley served as whipping-boy for much of the twentieth century, or perhaps because of this fact, the centenary, in 2004, of the publication of *Shakespearean Tragedy* led to a genuine consecration, Palgrave publishing the centenary edition of his famous book and John Russell Brown publishing a sympathetic guide to it called *A. C. Bradley on Shakespeare's Tragedies: A Concise Edition and Reassessment.*

My aim in this article is to contribute to the recent revival of interest in character in Shakespeare studies by proposing an alternative approach, one that examines character in the context of mediality and of orality and literacy, to allude to the title of the famous study by Walter Ong, from whom I am partly taking my cue. It seems to me that approaching drama from the angle of mediality is promising insofar as this genre, perhaps more than any other, has consistently existed on the in-

tersection of theatricality and literariness, of orality and literacy. As far back as ancient Greece, the inception of drama was already controlled by writing, even though other verbal genres were governed by oral delivery. Approximately two-and-a-half millennia later, drama is still orally performed, whereas other genres which used to be primarily oral, like epic and lyric genres, have long assumed a chiefly textual existence. So drama, more than any other genre, seems historically embedded in the twin media of the oral stage and the scripted page.

Shakespearean drama, more particularly, calls for such an approach for at least two reasons. Firstly, because of its historical location on the trajectory from an earlier, medieval pre-print culture to a later, firmly print-based culture of literacy. And secondly, because the page and the stage are the twin media for which Shakespeare conceived his plays. Such at least is the argument of a book I published in 2003, in which I argue that Shakespeare was not only the consummate man of the theatre to which much modern criticism had reduced him, but also a literary dramatist who anticipated and catered to a readership. In this book, I argue that one group of plays more than any other allows us to register the relationship of Shakespeare's plays to orality and literacy, namely those plays which survive in more than one version, in shorter and longer versions, what were formerly called "bad" and "good" quartos. I believe that the short versions correspond, in admittedly problematic fashion, to the abridged plays as they were orally delivered on stage to audiences that were in part illiterate but still endowed with considerable oral and aural faculties. The long, literate versions, on the other hand, correspond to what an emergent dramatic author wrote for readers in an attempt to raise the literary respectability of playtexts. Like Robert Weimann, I therefore situate Shakespeare's texts in "the environment of a culture in which the new learning and writing had not fully supplanted the vitality in the oral communication of the unlettered" and hold that "the Elizabethan theatre participated in a residually oral culture that affected certain variant playtexts" (7, 43).

In my monograph, I leave little room for an examination of the relationship of characterization to orality and literacy in the light of the textual evidence I adduce, confining my argument to little more than an afterthought in the last chapter. I therefore wish to return to the subject here in order to examine the dramatization of an individual character, the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, and to assess how the differences between

the theatrical and the literate versions are related to the twin media for which the versions were designed.

However, before I turn to the Nurse, I propose to recall how Walter Ong's influential study of *Orality and Literacy* addresses the subject of characterization:

> The modern reader has typically understood effective "characterization" in narrative or drama as the production of the "round" character, to use E. M. Forster's term . . . , the character that "has the incalculability of life about it." Opposed to the "round" character is the "flat" character, the type of character that never surprises the reader but, rather, delights by fulfilling expectations copiously. We know now that the type "heavy" (or "flat") character derives originally from primary oral narrative, which can provide characters of no other kind. (151)

Rather than judging "flat" characterization only by the standards of a modern, print-based culture, this account has the advantage of describing its effect ("fulfilling expectations copiously"). Whereas "flat" characterization is best viewed in the context of the cultures of orality out of which it grows, "round" characterization is profitably understood as part of the advent of increasing literacy:

> As discourse moves from primary orality to greater and greater chirographic and typographic control, the flat, "heavy" or type character yields to characters that grow more and more "round," that is, that perform in ways at first blush unpredictable but ultimately consistent in terms of the complex character structure and complex motivation with which the round character is endowed. . . . In the private worlds [writing and reading] generate, the feeling for the "round" human character is born – deeply interiorized in motivation, powered mysteriously, but consistently, from within. First emerging in chirographically controlled ancient Greek drama, the "round" character is further developed in Shakespeare's age after the coming of print, and comes to its peak with the novel, when, after the advent of the Age of Romanticism, print is more fully interiorized. (151-53)

Ong's study has, of course, long been subject to criticism and some of its arguments now seem decidedly dated, but the present passage does provide an enabling context for an assessment of characterization in Shakespeare and, in particular, in *Romeo and Juliet*. It allows us to historicize, and to recognize the limitations of, Bradleian character analysis, Bradley having been essentially a Victorian, who read the plays in novelistic fashion, equating "good" with "round" character, and therefore

preferring the tragedies to the comedies, without showing any awareness of how the literate medium, which he took for granted, shaped his reception of Shakespeare. Ong, by contrast, usefully suggests that certain differences in characterization are best understood not in qualitative terms – good, "round" characters as opposed to bad, "flat" characters – but in terms of, and as shaped by, the respective media for which they were designed.

Concerning the Nurse, I would like to argue that she is a different character in the first quarto of 1597 and the second quarto of 1599. The second quarto is the version we are familiar with; the first quarto is shorter by about one quarter and, even though it has the same plot, usually differs in the details of its staging and phrasing. Yet, significantly, with roughly 2,300 lines, the first quarto is compatible with what the prologue calls "the two hours' traffic of our stage," whereas the second quarto, at almost 3,000 lines, would take considerably longer to perform. It is the more readerly and literate nature of the second quarto as opposed to the more theatrical and oral nature of the first quarto which partly accounts, I believe, for the differences between the ways in which the Nurse is dramatized in the two texts. The Nurse may thus constitute a good example to test Ong's theory about characterization, orality, and literacy.

In the "Balcony Scene," the Nurse is not physically present on stage but nonetheless has a significant impact, even from beyond the stage.[1] One of the ways in which Shakespeare dramatizes the terrific sense of occasion that has made this scene so famous is the danger to which Romeo exposes himself by having penetrated the Capulets' *locus amoenus*:

> JULIET How cam'st thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?
> The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,
> And the place death, considering who thou art,
> If any of my kinsmen find thee here. (Evans 2.2.62-65)

Slightly later, Juliet adds: "If they do see thee, they will murder thee" (2.2.70). From the beginning of the conversation, Shakespeare establishes a sense of danger that threatens to intrude upon the two lovers. This intrusion is dramatized shortly after – Juliet: "I hear some noise within; dear love, adieu!" (2.2.136). As it turns out, the intrusion does

[1] I use "Balcony Scene" as a conventional label by which the scene has long been known, but it should be noted that the scene does not actually feature a balcony, only a window: "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?" (Evans 2.2.2).

not threaten to endanger Romeo's life, but it does interrupt their intimate encounter. Significantly, the character who interrupts Romeo and Juliet is of course the Nurse: "Anon, good Nurse" (2.2.137), Juliet shouts, and a few moments later, the Nurse herself calls twice from within: "Madam!" (2.2.149-51). Shakespeare thus chooses to identify the character who cuts short the encounter between Romeo and Juliet, and the character who cuts them short is the Nurse.

This, in any case, holds true for the version we are most familiar with, the second quarto. In the first quarto, by contrast, the source of the disturbance is not identified: "I hear some coming" (Erne 5.158), Juliet tells Romeo, and temporarily leaves the stage to avert the danger, yet when she returns, nothing encourages us to associate the threatened intrusion with the Nurse, who thus remains entirely absent from the scene.

A similar difference between the two versions can be observed in the next scene in which Romeo and Juliet meet. Having consummated their marriage, the two lovers, at the approach of day, postpone their farewell until, in the second quarto, the Nurse again intrudes upon them, causing Romeo's hasty departure: "Farewell, farewell! one kiss, and I'll descend" (3.5.42). The equivalent scene in the first quarto, by contrast, begins with a self-contained movement with Romeo and Juliet alone, and the Nurse does not enter until after Romeo has left. Following the Nurse's entrance, she warns Juliet of her mother's imminent arrival: "Madam, beware, take heed, the day is broke. / Your mother's coming to your chamber, make all sure" (14.56-7). When Juliet's mother has entered, the Nurse remains on stage throughout Juliet's confrontation with her mother. The Nurse in the second quarto, by contrast, exits before the arrival of Juliet's mother and does not re-enter until Capulet's appearance later in the scene. So the Nurse in the second quarto, contrary to the one in the first, not only intrudes upon Juliet and Romeo during what will turn out to be their final farewell, but is also absent when Juliet might need her most.

Collectively, the differences in the way the first and second quartos dramatize the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet's farewells amount to a significant shift in emphasis. All in all, Romeo and Juliet meet and speak no more than four times: Act 1 Scene 5, the Capulets' feast; Act 2 Scene 2, the "Balcony Scene"; Act 2 Scene 6, the Betrothal Scene in Friar Laurence's cell; and Act 3 Scene 5, their final parting. When they meet again, in the last scene, one of them is either unconscious or dead. The play is

thus structured around a series of precarious encounters between the two lovers, in which the fragility of their love, perhaps indeed the sense of doom hanging over it, is highlighted by means of the repeated dangers and intrusions with which it is threatened. In the second quarto, significantly, the Nurse is repeatedly associated with these intrusions, whereas in the first quarto, she is not.

What this means for the Nurse is that the character in the second quarto seems to be considerably more complex than the one in the first. In the shorter text, very little allows us to complicate the view of Juliet's confidante and former wet-nurse as a sympathetic go-between at the service of Juliet and Romeo, benevolent but limited, basically desirous to advance the cause of love though finally unable to do so, a one-time ally, whom Juliet – who, unlike the Nurse, outgrows her initial limitations – ultimately leaves behind. In the second quarto, however, the Nurse's character and motivations seem much harder to assess. She *seems* complicit with the young lovers, but the dramatic function Shakespeare repeatedly assigns to her arguably undermines this supposed complicity.

This view is corroborated by Act 2 Scene 5 in which Juliet anxiously awaits the Nurse's return with news from Romeo. When the Nurse does return, she is besieged by Juliet: "O honey Nurse, what news?"; "Nay, come, I pray thee speak, good, good Nurse, speak"; "Let me be satisfied, is't good or bad?"; "What says he of our marriage, what of that?"; "Sweet, sweet, sweet Nurse, tell me, what says my love?"; "Come, what says Romeo" (2.5.18-64). The Nurse deliberately delays her answer, claiming she is out of breath or pretending not to understand. The scene can clearly be played as pure comedy, indeed farce, yet the lengths to which the Nurse goes in the second quarto to postpone her answer surely also allows for a different reading, one which sees in her procrastination an almost sadistic pleasure which she derives from Juliet's agony or, at least, a pleasure which the Nurse derives from a temporary inversion of the power dynamics between them. It is noticeable that the sequence is radically shortened in the first quarto. Whereas the second quarto has fifty lines from the Nurse's entrance to the moment when she finally answers Juliet's questions (2.5.18-67), the first quarto has only about half as many lines (8.6-33). Because of the difference in length, the effect of the delayed answer can be very different. In the shorter text, the Nurse's procrastination is more likely to come across as playful,

whereas the longer text makes possible a darker reading. Q1's Nurse may be a tease, but Q2's may be a bit of a sadist.

Act 4 Scene 2 provides further evidence that the Nurse in the first quarto is a more straightforward character, and a more straightforwardly benevolent character, than her counterpart in the second quarto. In the second quarto, the Nurse converses with Capulet, Juliet's tyrannical father, confirming that Juliet has gone to Friar Laurence and informing Capulet of Juliet's return:

> CAPULET [. . .] What, is my daughter gone to Friar Lawrence?
> NURSE Ay forsooth.
> CAPULET Well, he may chance to do some good on her.
> A peevish self-willed harlotry it is.
> *Enter* JULIET.
> NURSE See where she comes from shrift with merry look. (4.2.10-14)

Strikingly, in the first quarto, the Nurse's speeches in this passage are reassigned to Capulet's Wife. Moreover, after Juliet's arrival, the Nurse in the first quarto, contrary to her counterpart in the second, actually speaks to Juliet, and does so in notably warm terms: "Come, sweetheart, shall we go?", the Nurse asks; "I prithee, let us," Juliet responds (16.32). What is conspicuous about this exchange is not only the warmth of expression – in stark contrast with the second quarto where the Nurse only speaks with Juliet's father – but also the fact that Juliet and the Nurse share an iambic pentameter: "Come, sweetheart, shall we go?", "I prithee, let us."[2] To recall with what subtlety Shakespeare uses shared lines, we need only think of Lorenzo and Jessica at the beginning of Act 5 in *The Merchant of Venice*, where Shakespeare makes the lovers share lines at the beginning and end of each of their first seven speeches (Wright 140-41). Comparing the Nurse in the first and the second quarto, a striking difference is again apparent. At the risk of making an obvious point, the Nurse's name, "Nurse," aligns her with Juliet, whose Nurse she was. This alignment seems to be maintained for much of the first quarto, whereas it seems repeatedly interrogated in the second quarto. In the first quarto, the Nurse's first allegiance is to Juliet; yet in the second, in Act 4 Scene 2, her allegiance seems to be primarily to Ju-

[2] Note that in keeping with an editorial tradition that goes back to the eighteenth century, my edition of Q1 *Romeo and Juliet* prints Juliet's and the Nurse's short speeches as two half lines which amount to a single verse line (16.32).

liet's parents, who of course violently clash with their daughter over the question of her marriage to Count Paris.[3]

The beginning of the following scene, Act 4 Scene 3, provides yet another indication of the nature of the Nurse's relationship to Juliet in the two versions. In the second quarto, the Nurse does not speak, and Juliet's chief concern appears to be to get rid of her: "Ay, those attires are best," Juliet says in the scene's opening line, "but, gentle Nurse, / I pray thee leave me to myself tonight" (4.3.1-2). The Nurse's silence in the second quarto contrasts strikingly with her caring words in the first quarto: "Come, come, what need you anything else? ... Well, there's a clean smock under your pillow, and so good night" (17.1-4). The passages confirm the different allegiance the Nurse in the two quartos seems to have.

A last passage that deserves to be commented upon is the so-called lamentation passage. After drinking Friar Laurence's potion, Juliet is found in her bed, immobile, seemingly dead. Following the arrival of the Nurse, Juliet's parents, Count Paris, and Friar Laurence, the characters express their grief in the most extravagant language. The effect is usually comic, not only because the audience knows what the characters do not know, namely that Juliet is alive, but also because Shakespeare seems to have intended several characters to speak at once (Lower), resulting in what Friar Laurence calls utter "confusions" (4.5.66). It may then be significant that the Nurse participates in these parallel lamentations in the second quarto – thus again aligning her with Juliet's parents – but does not in first quarto. If the lamentation passage makes fun of characters who display grief over the supposed death of someone they previously alienated, then the first quarto, significantly, excludes the Nurse from these characters, even though the second quarto does not. Here as elsewhere, the Nurse in the first quarto seems to be more sympathetic towards Juliet and more benevolent than her more complex counterpart in the second quarto.

The first quarto of *Romeo and Juliet* used to be thought of simply as an inferior version, a "corrupt text," a "memorial reconstruction," a "bad quarto," whose existence had to be acknowledged but with which critical engagement seemed unnecessary. More recently, it has come to be thought of as reflecting a theatrical version and thus of importance at

[3] My reading at this point seems related to a point that has recently been made by Wendy Wall: "I think it possible to argue generally that parental, church, and state authority are more lavishly displayed in Q2 than in Q1" (163).

least for what it can teach us about early modern theatrical practice.[4] Yet it may only be now that we are starting to realize how the medium impacts the different substantive versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, the first as well as the second quartos. If we recognize that the first quarto constitutes a version designed for oral delivery, whereas the second quarto is designed for a readerly reception, then it seems significant, as the example of the Nurse suggests, that characterization conforms to a logic pertaining to the oral and the literate medium respectively. The Nurse in the first quarto, to return to the passage by Ong which I quoted earlier, seems indeed "flat": her allegiance to Juliet seems clear and unambiguous, as is her motivation. She is a character who "never surprises" but "fulfil[s] expectations copiously," in conformity with the logic of orality as outlined by Ong. The Nurse in the second quarto, by contrast, is potentially a much more complex character, a character that does surprise like Ong's chirographically shaped round characters, who "perform in ways at first blush unpredictable" and who suggest a "complex character structure and complex motivation." Concerning the Nurse's motivation, is it possible that her wavering allegiance to Juliet and the concealed aggressions towards her as suggested by the endlessly protracted news telling is related to the loss of the Nurse's child, Susan, who, as the Nurse tells us in Act 1 Scene 3, was born the very same day as Juliet (1.3.17-23)? Of course, the text provides no answer to this question, but the second quarto, in contrast to the first, seems to invite such speculations which imply "the complex character structure and complex motivation with which the round character is endowed," to go back to Ong.

If my reading suggests that the Nurse in the first quarto is comparatively flat and her counterpart in the second quarto comparatively round, then due attention to mediality can keep us from simply equating flat with bad and round with good. In particular, historical awareness of the position of Shakespearean drama on the trajectory from an earlier predominantly oral to a later, firmly print-based literate culture can prevent us from teleologically taking for granted the superiority of the "round" character which a culture of literacy has helped bring about. A better understanding of the cultural contingency of characterization can therefore contribute, I believe, to the current revaluation of character as

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[4] Stephen Orgel, for instance, has commented that there is "very little evidence that will reveal to us the nature of a performing text in Shakespeare's theater; but there is a little. There are the "bad" quartos, whose evidence, in this respect, is not bad, but excellent" (22).

a category of literary analysis. An approach to character via Shakespeare's multiple-text plays can have a further, didactic import, in that it can contribute to an understanding of how literary characters are a language effect, as it were, a result of the words spoken by and about them, not something prior to and independent of the fictional text.

The Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, which this article focuses on, is of course far from being an isolated case. The King in the first quarto of Hamlet is much more of a straightforward villain and Laertes (spelled "Leartes" in the first quarto) is more of a straightforward revenger figure than their counterparts in the second quarto and the Folio (Melchiori 206-07). The Queen, in the same play, seems a victim of the King's villainy and complicit with Hamlet in the first quarto, whereas the allegiance of the figure we are familiar with from the longer versions seems far more divided, or less penetrable (Kehler). The King in the first quarto *Henry V*, to add only one example, seems a patriotic and jingoistic warrior king in comparison with the more complex figure in the Folio version, whose alleged heroism, proclaimed by the Chorus, is repeatedly undercut by the events in the play itself (Patterson 71-92). Repeatedly, in other words, we are becoming aware of media-specific differences between the multiple versions of some of Shakespeare's plays. This article adds another piece to a puzzle from which emerges, with increasing clarity, a Shakespeare who consciously wrote with two media in mind and, consciously or unconsciously, adapted his dramatic craft to the respective media – Shakespeare, consummate man of the theatre, as well as Shakespeare, literary dramatist.

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