Romeo and the Apothecary

In Romeo and Juliet, act 5 scene 1, Romeo devotes sixteen lines to describing a minor character, the apothecary, who appears only in this scene. Why? For that matter, why did Shakespeare write this scene at all? Its contribution to the forward action of the play is minimal. Furthermore, Romeo's behaviour here is, on the face of it, inappropriate. He has just learned that Juliet is dead; we would not expect him to muse over the condition of a poor apothecary at such a critical moment. And if the apothecary's sole role in the play is to provide Romeo with poison, why devote such effort to describing him, especially since a short explanatory speech from Romeo in scene three could explain much more economically how he has acquired the poison?

Admittedly, the apothecary is part of the source material for the play, so one could argue that his presence is the result of Shakespeare's faithfulness to that source. However, since Shakespeare elsewhere demonstrates his willingness to deviate from his sources, his retention of the character suggests more than simple fidelity to a source; if he includes the character it is because he has chosen to do so, not because he feels bound to duplicate every nuance of other versions of the story. Furthermore, and more significantly, Shakespeare does not merely retain the apothecary, he fleshes him out. Arthur Brooke's version of the character in his *Romeus and Juliet*, for instance, is typical in its presentation of the figure; in Brooke's poem, the entire exchange with the apothecary takes only twenty-three lines: Romeo's soliloquy describing the apothecary in Shakespeare's play is nearly as long, and provides significantly more detail about the figure. Brooke tells us only that Romeo finds

An apothecary ... unbusied at his door,
Whom by his heavy countenance he guesséd to be poor.
And in his shop he saw his boxes were but few,
And in his window, of his wares, there was so small a shew;
Wherefore our Romeus assuredly hath thought,
What by no friendship could be got, with money should be bought.²

The only detail from Brooke common to Shakespeare is the figure's poverty: all the descriptive features are Shakespeare's.

Since the apothecary in the source is no more than a plot device, we might wonder why Shakespeare devotes so much space to him if he is only such a device in the play as well. If we consider the scene as a whole, as a dramatic unit enhancing the overall structure of the play through the language Romeo uses, the thematic links between the action here and action elsewhere, and, most importantly, who might have acted the role of the apothecary, we can discover in it a substantial contribution to the development of the play.

When he learns of Juliet's death, Romeo resolves to commit suicide but does not precede this decision with an excessive outpouring of grief, as his previous emotional outbursts, both in the play and in earlier versions of the story, might have led us to expect. Jill Levenson notes that 'Bandello's treatment of the events immediately leading to Romeo's death sets the precedent for Boaistuau, Brooke, and Painter'; when Romeo is told of Giulietta's putative death, he 'responds to the message with hysteria tempered by rhetorical decorum. After leaping in a frenzy from his bed, he expresses grief in a series of apostrophes.... With his last apostrophe, he grasps a sword to kill himself'.3 Of course, another such outburst is hardly necessary at this point in the play, since the depth of Romeo's feeling has repeatedly been made clear - indeed, we have already seen him bewail her loss at great length, when he learned of his banishment. Shakespeare associates Romeo's initial frustrated suicide attempt not with this moment in the story but with that earlier moment, making Friar Lawrence, not Romeo's servant, the one who prevents the attempt.4 Romeo there likens the threat of banishment to death and offers to kill himself; he is restrained by a sharp rebuke from Friar Lawrence:

Hold thy desperate hand!

...Wilt thou slay thyself, And slay thy lady that in thy life [lives], By doing damnèd hate upon thyself?

 $(3.3.108, 116-18)^5$

We know from this earlier scene how Romeo would react to losing Juliet and so what we see here is a continuation, rather than a repetition, of his earlier outburst: we now see him actively pursuing the means to commit suicide as he threatened to do earlier. He is able to pursue suicide actively because there is now no Friar Lawrence to intervene.

But why describe in detail the apothecary from whom he intends to purchase his poison? Certainly, Romeo must say something to approximate the passage of time as he wends his way to the apothecary's shop, and to build up our impression of the setting for the scene. But the description also paints a compelling picture of the apothecary's misery:

I do remember an apothecary -And hereabouts 'a dwells - which late I noted In tatt'red weeds, with overwhelming brows, Culling of simples; meagre were his looks, Sharp misery had worn him to the bones; And in his needy shop a tortoise hung, An alligator stuff'd, and other skins Of ill-shap'd fishes, and about his shelves A beggarly account of empty boxes, Green earthen pots, bladders, and musty seeds, Remnants of packthread, and old cakes of roses Were thinly scattered, to make up a show. Noting this penury, to myself I said, 'An' if a man did need poison now, Whose sale is present death in Mantua, Here lives a caitiff wretch would sell it him.'

(5.1.37-52)

James H. Seward notes that the bleakness of this passage reflects not only the apothecary's poverty but also Romeo's state of mind: 'When all hope, all joy have been drained out of a person, life, like the Apothecary's shop, becomes nothing more than a repository of worthless objects, a faded and shopworn collection of unwanted merchandise'.6

Whereas early in the play, Romeo's state of mind is revealed through his emotional outbursts (his lush poetry reflecting his happiness or anguish), here Shakespeare paints a more subtle picture. A much more subdued Romeo now reveals his mental state in bleak, oppressive terms that displace his own despair onto the landscape: he describes the apothecary's shop and his own inner landscape. His concentration on negative images in the description of the apothecary reflects his own desolation at the loss of Juliet.

This fact is further revealed in his subsequent dialogue with the apothecary. As Seward notes, Romeo's words reflect 'an almost violent desire to be done with life'. No aspect of life holds any attraction for him and he even seems surprised that one as obviously miserable as the apothecary hesitates to end his life: 'Art thou so bare and full of wretchedness, / And fearest to die?'

(5.1.68-9). Romeo sees only the negative; indeed, he sees the world as the enemy. In coercing the apothecary to sell him poison, Romeo points out the various ills of the man's life – famine, oppression, contempt, beggary – and asserts, 'The world is not thy friend, nor the world's law' (72). But even wealth and standing do not mitigate the world's ills, as he subsequently asserts:

There is thy gold, worse poison to men's souls,

Doing more murther in this loathsome world,

Than these poor compounds that thou mayest not sell.

I sell thee poison, thou hast sold me none.

(80-3)

To Romeo the things of the world, even its wealth, are poison, for they now exist in a world devoid of Juliet. He reverses normal values, seeking escape from life, which is now death to him. Because of his loss, Romeo rejects everything the world has to offer. He chooses to see only the negative: one who is poor is miserable because of his poverty, but wealth causes only misery, he asserts, which leaves little ground for happiness. Romeo does not pour forth and thus purge his grief; he is desolated by it and calls forth only images of death and despair. In taking poison he only does to his body what his grief has done to his disposition.

But the scene offers even more than a different insight into Romeo's mental state. The character of the apothecary is of further importance if we consider that Shakespeare probably wrote the play with the fact in mind that parts would be doubled. The apothecary is not the only chemist we meet in the play: central to the plot is Friar Lawrence's alchemical ploy to reunite Romeo and Juliet. If the friar and the apothecary are doubled, various 'thematic ramifications' ensue. However, since the friar reappears on stage so soon after the apothecary's departure that Giorgio Melchiori concludes, 'any actor could have taken the role of the Apothecary (except those playing Romeo, Balthasar, and Friar Lawrence, the last entering immediately after the Apothecary's exit)', we should explore first the question of whether such a doubling was possible before arguing for its dramatic appropriateness.

According to the quartos and the folio, both Romeo and the apothecary exit following Romeo's last line in 5.1; the first stage direction of the subsequent scene in all but the first quarto has Friar John enter 'to Frier Lawrence' (quoted here from the folio); the first quarto indicates no entrance for Friar Lawrence at all, though the subsequent quartos and the folio have him enter after John's 'Holy Franciscan Friar! brother, ho!' If we accept these directions, then Friar Lawrence appears almost immediately after the apothecary leaves the stage; Melchiori's objection is based in the closeness of these two

appearances. And even if we accept the possibility of such a quick change only one line of dialogue intervenes – there remains William Ringler's dictum that 'one convention from which Shakespeare never deviates is that an actor who exits at the end of one scene never reappears at the beginning of the following one'.12 Under such circumstances, it would seem impossible for the same actor to play both roles.

The first objection, the brevity of time allowed for a costume change, is the more serious but it is not insurmountable. First, the stage direction calling for both Romeo and the apothecary to exit together can be questioned. Although some editors retain the direction, others interpolate a direction for the apothecary to exit following Romeo's line 'Farewell! Buy food, and get thyself in flesh' (5.1.84), a more logical point of departure. This shift, however, still allows only three lines instead of one for the change. Ringler notes that 'Elizabethan actors apparently prided themselves on being quick-change artists', 13 though Jean MacIntyre observes, 'with just a minute or two between exit and re-entry, [the actor] can only doff or don something like a cloak, gown, headdress, wig, or beard'.14

Nevertheless, extremely quick changes are not only possible but also dramatically effective. Stephen Booth describes two 1957 productions which depended on doubling. In one Robert Morley played two characters 'who at one point met each other in a doorway: one departed - balding and in a three-piece grey business suit - just as the other entered with red hair and wearing a sporty checkered jacket'; in the other Richard Attenborough 'exited, rear stage right, and - in what seemed less time than it would have taken him to run diagonally across the stage - sauntered from the wings at the front of the stage on the other side, totally recostumed'.15 He also argues for the doubling of Theseus with Oberon and Hippolyta with Titania in A Midsummer Night's Dream, not only on the grounds of Peter Brook's successful production but also on the grounds of textual evidence suggesting the paralleling of the characters. Such a doubling requires the actors to exit as Oberon and Titania following 4.1.102 and to reenter immediately as Theseus and Hippolyta (Theseus speaks line 103), but the doubling has come to be accepted as valid.

The costume change from apothecary to friar need not be a complex one, especially since the apothecary appears only once and his appearance is established as much by Romeo's description as by anything else. The friar's cassock could be thrown easily over a simple costume, making the conversion complete and quick. The change would be facilitated were the scene played on the inner stage, thus not requiring the actor to move very far while first Romeo left and then Friar John entered.

Romeo's speech describing the apothecary fills time as Romeo moves across the stage, suggesting the walk through Mantua to the shop. Romeo arrives and observes, 'Being holiday, the beggar's shop is shut' (5.1.56). The apothecary enters after Romeo calls him forth. Levenson notes that *Romeo and Juliet* was first played on a stage open on three sides and that 'Acting areas above and at the rear supplemented this front platform, and at least two doors gave access to it'. The space at the rear would have been used for the tomb late in act 5 but would have been available for other functions earlier. Romeo's description of the shop coupled with his walk across the stage suggest a specific stage locale for the scene, a suggestion reinforced by his arrival at a closed shop from which the apothecary emerges. Logically, the apothecary would return to his shop upon exiting while Romeo would use a different exit, thus using an exit removed from the apothecary's. The subsequent scene occurs in Friar Lawrence's cell, another good candidate for the inner space.

However, the stage directions indicate that Friar Lawrence enters, not that he is discovered, and Richard Hosley challenges the assumption that 'the unqualified term *Enter* in Elizabethan stage-direction can mean "is discovered," a sense not recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* and not current in the modern theatre'. Nevertheless, we need not assume that the scene could not be played on the inner space, for the previous direction suggests that Friar John enters 'to Frier Lawrence' (emphasis added), a direction that implies Lawrence is already present on stage (the absence of any direction for his entrance in Q1 might support this contention). Such a direction would be inconsistent unless Friar Lawrence was in the inner space, his cell, whence he enters upon being called forth by Friar John. Indeed, Friar John's calling forth of a Franciscan friar from the space just occupied by the apothecary would make the character transition clear; just as Romeo's speech establishes that we will see the apothecary, Friar John's establishes that we will now see a friar.

Ringler's argument that Shakespeare never has an actor exit and then reenter immediately still could stand in the way of accepting the possibility of the doubling, unless one argues that the apothecary's possible departure two lines before the end of 5.1 and the friar's appearance at the second line of 5.2 constitutes a sufficiently long break: Ringler does concede that 'the interval between exit and reentry can be quite brief, as in the case of Flavius and Marcellus, who exit at the end of [Julius Caesar] 1.1 and reenter in 1.2 immediately after Caesar and the others have assembled on the stage'. However, one might also argue that Ringler's dictum is based on an a priori assumption about planned exits and reentries, according to which any such movements that

occur must be explained away as unintentional. Ringler thus argues that Ariel and Prospero are able to exit in The Tempest at the end of 4.1 and reenter at the beginning of 5.1 because an intervening scene has been lost. And, of course, he rules out the possibility of Oberon and Titania being played by the actors who play Theseus and Hippolyta, since such a doubling would require just such an immediate reentry. The validity of Ringler's dictum, then, is open to debate; certainly, even he finds the one exception to it in Ariel and Prospero, while such cogent arguments as the one for the doubling in A Midsummer Night's Dream cannot work if we accept Ringler's position.

The friar and the apothecary, then, could conceivably be played by the same actor. But are there grounds to suggest the roles were in fact doubled? If we consider the actions of Friar Lawrence in comparison with the actions of the apothecary, we shall find enough similarities to warrant the idea, for the two figures are parallel in various ways and both are similarly pivotal to the plot, albeit with the apothecary in a much smaller role.

Throughout the previous act, we have watched the development of Friar Lawrence's plan to reunite the two lovers by giving Juliet a potion that will place her in a death-like sleep. We recall that we first meet the friar as he is gathering herbs and commenting on the potential in them to be used either as poisons or as medicines:

Within the infant rind of this weak flower Poison hath residence and medicine power; For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part, Being tasted, stays all senses with the heart. Two such opposed kings encamp them still In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will; And where the worser is predominant, Full soon the canker death eats up the plant.

(2.3.23 - 30)

Again, according to the earliest editions of the play, Romeo enters just before this portion of the friar's speech, though many editors move that entrance to the end of the friar's speech, in violation of the textual evidence. By having Romeo enter while this speech is being spoken, the play emphasizes the link between the friar's words and Romeo's own delicate emotional balance - and the parallel the friar draws between the poison of herbs and the poison of 'rude will' clarifies an image pattern associated with Romeo since the opening scene and foreshadows Romeo's ultimate fate.

Indeed, the friar's botanical mini-allegory clearly recalls Montague's description of his son:

But he, [his] own affection's counsellor,
Is to himself (I will not say how true)
But to himself so secret and so close,
So far from sounding and discovery,
As is the bud bit with an envious worm,
Ere he can spread his sweet leaves to the air
Or dedicate his beauty to the [sun].
Could we but learn from whence his sorrows grow,
We would as willingly give cure as know.

(1.1.147-55)

The precursor to Friar Lawrence's mini-allegory is evident enough. Also evident, here and throughout the dialogue of Montague, Lady Montague, and Benvolio at this point, is Romeo's wilful indulgence in 'the worser', as he 'makes himself an artificial night' (1.1.140) (a night disturbingly realized by the conclusion of the play, when Romeo asserts, 'I still will stay with thee, / And never from this [palace] of dim night / Depart again' [5.3.106-8]). Nathaniel Wallace notes that Romeo 'is strongly associated with those aspects of the text that suggest that any given thing can become any other thing through metaphor'. 20 Romeo's first extended speech, as is well known, is a series of oxymorons; the implications of the oxymoronic impulse in Romeo become increasingly grave as he breaks down the distinction between grace and 'rude will' insisted upon by Friar Lawrence, ultimately concluding that the apothecary's potion is 'cordial and not poison' (5.1.85). When Romeo is left to his own devices, free to counsel himself, he is predisposed to the selfpoisoning melancholic humour; bereft late in the play of any counsellor other than himself, he wallows once again in midnight misery. He attempts to externalize the impulse - 'O mischief, thou are swift / To enter in the thoughts of desperate men! (35-6), he asserts – but his predisposition to such thoughts has been well-established long before this point, as has the friar's role as opponent to such thoughts.

Nor is the friar's alchemical knowledge incidental to the plot. He is, as we have seen already, introduced to us as an apothecary gathering herbs, a point made explicit (in case we have missed it) when Romeo, indulging in his own mini-allegory, seeks the friar's advice:

I have been feasting with mine enemy, Where on a sudden one hath wounded me That's by me wounded; both our remedies Within thy help and holy physic lies.

(2.3.49-52)

Romeo's conceit is literalized later in the play when the friar concocts a solution to their problem, for it is his potion Juliet takes in order to simulate death and thus be reunited with Romeo. Indeed, throughout act 4 we have watched the development of the friar's plot, and in 4.5, the scene immediately before 5.1, we have seen the successful completion of the first part of the plan. When Romeo appears in the subsequent scene, then, we might logically expect to see the progression of the plan, with the arrival of the messenger Friar Lawrence promised to send to Romeo at 4.1.115-16. Indeed, Romeo's own expectation is that Balthasar will bear tidings from Friar Lawrence: 'News from Verona! How now, Balthasar? / Dost thou not bring me letters from the friar?' (5.1.12-13). Contrary to all expectations, however, Balthasar's news is of Juliet's death.

The friar's machinations have been at the forefront of the previous scenes, and Romeo's inquiry regarding messages from him recalls Friar Lawrence to mind even as we see his plan go awry with the delivery of this unexpected message. Shakespeare underscores this violation of expectation and again calls the friar to mind, by having Romeo repeat, 'Hast thou no letters to me from the friar?' (31). The friar and his plot, then, are strongly in our minds at this point, but Romeo does not receive news of the potion and so is unaware that the remedy does indeed still lie in the friar's hands; instead, he seeks out the apothecary. Now, when Romeo describes the apothecary, he recalls he first saw the man 'Culling of simples' (40) - that is, gathering herbs, just as Friar Lawrence was doing when first we saw him. The first image of the apothecary recalls the first image of the friar, who, as his sleeping draught proves, is no mean apothecary himself. The combination of the friar's conspicuous absence - he is not only absent in fact but even the expected messages from him are absent - and the similarity between the occupations of the friar and the apothecary establishes a connection between the two.

Romeo is at a moment of crisis but he has no Friar Lawrence to guide him this time. It is apt then that, deprived of the good counsel of the friar, he should turn to a surrogate in the apothecary. If the actor is the same, then the figure who has been associated with alchemy from his first appearance, who has acted as Romeo's support – indeed, who has once before prevented him from committing suicide - and who has provided Juliet with her sleeping draught, is the figure to whom Romeo turns for aid and from whom he obtains, as did Juliet, the potion he desires. In his article 'Economy and Recognition: Thirteen Shakespearean Puzzles', John C. Meagher makes arguments for doubling in several plays, including doubling the friar and Benvolio, Romeo's two advisors in the play.21 It demands little to add the apothecary, with his seven

lines, to the actor's repertoire, and the doubling would thus grant the same face to Romeo's two advisors and the figure he turns to in their absence. Uncontrolled by Friar Lawrence, Romeo succumbs to his 'rude will' and 'the canker death eats up the plant' (2.3.30). The friar's botanical/alchemical image of the human psyche bears bitter fruit in Romeo's case, for he turns to the very poisons the friar associated with humanity's 'worser' qualities. The tragedy that follows, one might argue, results from Romeo's inability to deal rationally with his grief without the friar's guidance. On his own, Romeo cannot face adversity with grace; instead, he rejects life as worthless and then takes his own.

Romeo's speech about the apothecary establishes a link between the apothecary and the friar, one important to the revelation of Romeo's state of mind. The scene does not encourage us to think of Romeo's suicide as merely an act of despair at his loss. Rather, it implies, through the connection with Friar Lawrence and his speech about the parallels between the medicinal aspects of plants and the contrasting grace and good will of humanity, and through its emphasis on Romeo's wilfully negative outlook (earlier countered by the friar's sharp rebuke but here given free rein), that Romeo's following actions arise from a faulty perspective as well as from grief. Romeo has reason to grieve, or believes he does, but by establishing a connection between the friar and the apothecary, the scene ensures that we recognize his suicide as the outcome of his own characteristics as much as of the circumstances in which he finds himself.

The scene, then, is far from trivial and the description of the apothecary far more than inconsequential detail designed to fill up time. Instead, the scene contributes to our understanding of Romeo's failure to respond wisely to his loss. The description of the apothecary gathering herbs recalls the friar's first appearance and speech, while the doubling of the roles makes the connection explicit: we recognize more than mere grief in Romeo's suicide, but the dominance of 'rude will' over grace. We cannot, then, see Romeo as a victim only of crossed stars, or even of cross parents, but of his own nature. Therein lies a truer tragedy than we would find were all Romeo's afflictions purely external.

Notes

¹ I wish to express my appreciation to Dr John C. Meagher, whose comments on early drafts of this paper contributed substantially to its development. I also wish to acknowledge the valuable editorial assistance of Lisa Macklem.

- 2 Arthur Brooke, Brooke's 'Romeus and Juliet': Being the Original of Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet', J.J. Munro (ed) (New York, 1908), 2567-72.
- 3 Jill Levenson, 'Romeo and Juliet Before Shakespeare', Studies in Philology 81 (1984), 339-40.
- 4 However, see E. Pearlman, 'Staging Romeo and Juliet: Evidence from Brooke's Romeus', Theatre Survey 34 (1993), which argues that the nurse, not the friar, prevents Romeo's suicide at this point.
- 5 William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, The Riverside Shakespeare, G. Blakemore Evans (ed) (Boston, 1974). Unless otherwise noted subsequent citations are from this edition. Square-bracketed words in quotations do not appear in Q1 (or in some subsequent states).
- 6 James H. Seward, Tragic Vision in 'Romeo and Juliet' (Washington, D.C., 1973), 183.
- 7 Seward, Tragic Vision, 183.
- 8 In Shakespeare in Performance: Romeo and Juliet (Manchester, 1987), Jill Levenson notes that since Shakespeare 'probably began to write the play before the Chamberlain's Men incorporated, he did not know precisely which actors would perform his script. It follows that he must have prepared it simply for an adult company of twelve actors and a few extras' (13). He would have known, however, that whoever played the apothecary would certainly be doubling another part or parts, and so it is possible that Shakespeare could have looked for an appropriate character with whom to pair the figure.
- 9 Stephen Booth, 'Speculations on Doubling in Shakespeare's Plays', Shakespeare: The Theatrical Dimension, Philip C. McGuire and David A. Samuelson (eds) (New York, 1979), 113. Since Booth's phrase applies aptly to the point I am trying to make, I use it here.
- 10 Giorgio Melchiori, 'Peter, Balthasar, and Shakespeare's Art of Doubling', Modern Language Review 78 (1983), 789.
- 11 Cited from William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet: Second Quarto, 1599 (Oxford, 1949). Q1 offers no entrance at all for Friar Laurence according to the textual notes in the Riverside edition.
- 12 William Ringler, 'The Number of Actors in Shakespeare's Early Plays', The Seventeenth-Century Stage: A Collection of Critical Essays, Gerald Eades Bentley (ed) (Chicago, 1968), 114.
- 13 Ringler, 'The Number of Actors', 121.
- 14 Jean MacIntyre, "One that Hath Two Gowns": Costume Change in Some Elizabethan Plays', English Studies in Canada 13 (1987), 12-13.
- 15 Booth, 'Speculations', 114.
- 16 Levenson, Shakespeare in Performance, 10.

- 17 Additional associations with Friar Lawrence's cell and with the apothecary's shop would create an economical and visually powerful link between the key locations associated with the love and death wishes of Romeo and Juliet. Leslie Thomson, "With patient ears attend": Romeo and Juliet on the Elizabethan Stage', Studies in Philology 92 (1995), 242, suggests, for instance, that it was used for Juliet's bed chamber earlier in the play and became her tomb as well.
- 18 Richard Hosley, 'The Discovery-Space in Shakespeare's Globe', The Seventeenth-Century Stage: A Collection of Critical Essays, Bentley (ed), 199. The absence of citations of 'enter' meaning 'is discovered' in the OED is perhaps problematic but need not be insurmountable; the fact that no citation records the meaning does not make the meaning impossible (since the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence), and the variations in the directions between Q1 and the other early printings create some uncertainty about the precise circumstances they describe.
- 19 Ringler, 'The Number of Actors', 114.
- 20 Nathaniel Wallace, 'Cultural Tropology in Romeo and Juliet', Studies in Philology 88 (1991), 336.
- 21 John C. Meagher, 'Economy and Recognition: Thirteen Shakespearean Puzzles', Shakespeare Quarterly 35 (1984), 7-21 (especially 11-13).