

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Romeo and Juliet* presented by the Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company at the  
Garrick Theatre, London, UK. May 12-August 13, 2016.**

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Directed by Rob Ashford and Kenneth Branagh. Set and Costumes by Christopher Oram. Lighting by Howard Hudson. Sound by Christopher Shutt. Music by Patrick Doyle. Choreography by Rob Ashford. Fights by Bret Yount. Voice by Barbara Houseman. With Nikki Patel (Balthasar), Racheal Ofori (Sampson), Jack Colgrave Hirst (Benvolio), Ansu Kabia (Tybalt), Taylor James (Prince), Zoe Rainey (Lady Montague), Chris Porter (Lord Montague), Richard Madden (Romeo), Michael Rouse (Lord Capulet), Tom Hanson (Paris, understudy Romeo), Kathryn Wilder (Peter), Matthew Hawksley (Anthony and Friar John, understudy Paris), Pip Jordan (Potpan, understudy Anthony), Marisa Berenson (Lady Capulet), Meera Syal (Nurse), Lily James (Juliet), Derek Jacobi (Mercutio), Samuel Valentine (Friar Laurence).

As an essay in the program by Nicoletta Simborowski suggested, the stage and costumes were designed to recall *La Dolce Vita*, Federico Fellini's black and white film about Italy in the 1950s, 'a glossy surface' hiding a 'profoundly dysfunctional society, split along regional, class and political lines'. Except for Juliet, who wore white, the actors were dressed in blacks and shades of gray. The stage was surrounded by tall white marble columns. Additional columns later descended to create enclosed spaces—the Friar's church, for example, in 2.5 and 4.1. Marble slabs, stacked to create steps and platforms, moved on and off the stage, providing, at various times, two or three elevated playing spaces for the actors.

The production began with a woman in black, kneeling upstage right, her body thrust forward, wailing in grief. With the cast gathered behind them, Romeo and Juliet walked from left to right across the front of the stage. Once they exited, the actors began to move, suggesting a busy city street, until two women (identified in the program as

Sampson and Balthasar) grabbed the same chair in a café. All but one line of the dialogue among the servants was cut: as they struggled over the chair, one woman said to the other, 'do you bite your tongue at me', and then the fight broke out. Almost at once a gunshot sounded, and the Prince, dressed as a *carabiniere*, entered to bring order to the stage.

During a summer of cross-gender casting in major roles (Michelle Terry and Catrin Aaron as Henry V and Fluellen in Regent's Park, Gillian Bevan as Cymbeline for the RSC in Stratford, and Lucy Thackeray as Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at The Globe), the casting of Kathryn Wilder as Peter seemed largely unremarkable, although it necessitated cutting his joke about having his weapon out (2.3.147-8). The significantly unconventional casting in this production involved not gender but gerontology: Derek Jacobi, who was then seventy-seven years old, played Mercutio.

Jacobi's debonair Mercutio arrived for Capulet's feast dressed in a white dinner jacket and carrying a cane with a silver head. He delivered the Queen Mab speech as if it were an aria, with none of the desperation or torment with which actors sometimes color it. He stood downstage, a little to the right of center, and spoke the lines, while Benvolio and Romeo stood on either side, illuminating him with the flashlights they carried. When he had finished the speech, he exited doing a soft shoe behind his young friends. Later, in 2.3, twirling his cane, he did the 'old hare hoar' (125-30)<sup>1</sup> as a song and dance routine around the Nurse. Although his cane concealed a sword, he had no opportunity to use it in a duel with Tybalt. As they initially crossed swords, Mercutio leaned forward and kissed him. Romeo immediately got between them and, as he did so, Tybalt stabbed Mercutio.

As if to counterbalance casting a septuagenarian as Mercutio, a young actor (Samuel Valentine), who seemed about the same age as Romeo, played Friar Lawrence. Perhaps because the Friar was young (or perhaps because his lines can seem sometimes sententious), his observations on the action and his advice to Romeo were often cut. He said nothing about 'grace and rude will' (2.2.28), he did not advise Romeo to love moderately (2.5.14), and he did not express his fear for Juliet—'so light a foot / Will ne'er wear out the everlasting flint' (2.5.16-17). He comforted Lady Capulet as she lamented (in 3.1) the death of Tybalt, and even drew a sexually flirtatious overture from the Nurse. The Friar did not appear at Capulet's tomb until after Juliet was dead, and he could not therefore abandon her when she awoke. His long final speech was also cut

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<sup>1</sup> Act, scene, and line references are to William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

back, and, as the play ended, he stood by himself, his head down, at the left side of the stage.

In addition to Derek Jacobi, the cast included other well known actors—Marisa Berenson as Lady Capulet, Meera Syal as the Nurse, and the stars of Kenneth Branagh's *Cinderella*, Lily James and Richard Madden, as Romeo and Juliet. On the night I saw the show, however, Richard Madden was indisposed (and some members of the audience clearly disappointed). But Tom Hanson, who ordinarily played Paris, successfully substituted for him, and both the cast and the audience cheered him wildly at the curtain call. Some theatrical history had been made that night as well. Tom Hanson is the son of the actors Alexander Hanson and Samantha Bond, and his mother watched him proudly from the stalls as he played his first major role in the West End.

Lily James proved an animated and vibrant Juliet. She first appeared with a book in her hand, did cartwheels as she exited the scene (1.3) with her mother and the Nurse, and at Capulet's feast sang with Tybalt behind a standing microphone some of the words her mother had spoken to her at 1.3.81-96. In the balcony scene that was played without a balcony (only a stone wall a foot or two above the stage separated the lovers), Juliet was giddy (and a little sick) from the prosecco she drank from a bottle that then became a weapon when she grasped its neck at 'what man art thou' (2.1.94). When the Nurse reported that Romeo would make her a wife (2.4.69), she began to hiccup. As the play turned toward its tragic end, however, she grew less exuberant. Preparing to drink the drug the Friar had given her, she spoke her lines to music and then fell to the stage, pulling down around her the circular curtain in which she had been standing, and lay motionless, as if wrapped in a shroud.

The production from time to time suggested it imagined the Capulets as a dysfunctional family ('manipulative, violent and repressive' in the words of Nicoletta Simborowski's essay), but it did not develop the idea in very much detail. Capulet slowed the pace of his speech when he said to Paris 'too soon marred are those so early made' (1.2.13). Juliet and the Nurse said 'ay' together (1.3.59) as the Nurse brought her story of Juliet's fall to a close, suggesting some intimacy between them. Lady Capulet seemed to calm Tybalt down after his argument with Capulet at the feast, and she walked him off the stage with her arm in his. In 3.1, she and Capulet stood apart as she mourned the murdered Tybalt, and the Friar comforted her. When Capulet made his 'desperate tender' (3.4.12) of Juliet's love, he seemed drunk, and, as Lady Capulet crossed diagonally across the stage, she paused to take a pill before exiting. Capulet was extremely violent and abusive to the three women in 3.5, finally ending up stretched out

on top of Juliet as he berated her, and Lady Capulet, after refusing Juliet's pleas, exited the stage in tears.

The apothecary scene was cut (although Romeo's reference to him in the tomb was retained). Juliet awoke immediately after Romeo died, and, without the Friar in the tomb, she at once knelt over him and spoke her final words. The production ended with a tableau: the Friar alone at stage left, Romeo and Juliet dead beneath the bier at center stage, the Capulets and the Montagues positioned at its four corners, and the Prince standing behind it, speaking the final words of the play.