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## The Significance of the Minor Characters in the Play

In his play *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare puts his minor characters to good use. Romeo's friend Mercutio and Juliet's nurse are both characters that are not considered the main focus of the play, but nevertheless play a crucial role in the lives of Shakespeare's central characters. The nurse acts as a link between the Capulet and Montague families, and thus allows communication and planning to take place between Romeo and Juliet, while Mercutio's presence in the story is instrumental to the plot. Each role is useful and necessary in the play because they provide some comic relief, but also because their personalities help to define the protagonists and their actions enhance the way that the story turns out. Without these characters, the play would not function properly.

Mercutio and the nurse both enhance the play's theme of 'young love' by comparing their level-headed ways to the passion-driven ways of the main characters. The crude language that is used by Mercutio and the constant sexual references that are made by the nurse amplify the naïveté of the love between Romeo and Juliet. Both have a preoccupation with sex, while Romeo and Juliet prefer to profess the complete adoration that they have for one another. Both of these minor characters act as foils to the protagonists. The nurse is both aged and, though well meaning, somewhat of a bumbling fool. She often confuses words and repeats herself, whereas Juliet is well-spoken and seems to be much more educated than her confidante. Similarly, where Juliet is a sign of youth in its prime, the nurse is much older and has given birth and been married, although both her husband and child are said to be deceased. In the same way that the nurse stands as the opposite of Juliet, Mercutio is much different than Romeo. Romeo is a lovestruck romantic, while Mercutio is a clever realist. In the first act, Romeo is troubled by his unrequited feelings for Rosalind. He begins to question love and states, "Is love a tender thing? It is too rough, too rude, too boisterous, and it pricks like a thorn." (I.iv. 25 – 26). In response, Mercutio says, "If love be rough with you, be rough with love;/Prick love for pricking you and beat love down." (I.iv. 27 – 28). Romeo is melodramatic and likely expects a similarly sensational and sympathetic response to his situation. However, Mercutio is far too down-to-earth to lend any importance Romeo's 'woe is me' statements, and essentially tells him to 'get over it' and move on. Mercutio's straightforward proclamations serve to bring the audience back to reality as well and allow us to recognize Romeo's tendency to be over-dramatic. By providing us with these oppositional characters, Shakespeare highlights the qualities that he finds important within Romeo and Juliet.

While the nurse and Mercutio serve to promote themes within the story and to make the viewer notice certain qualities in the protagonists, they are also very important to the development of the plot. Mercutio's death signifies the transition of the story from the path of a comedy to that

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of a tragedy. Because Romeo does not specifically tell Mercutio of his newfound love for Juliet, it is impossible for Mercutio to use his words to affect the plot. However, his death does inspire Romeo to seek revenge on Tybalt, and thus has a profound effect on the fate of the two lovers.

In contrast to this relationship, Juliet and her nurse are very close, and she chooses to turn to the nurse for assistance in her relationship with Romeo. This allows the nurse to have a direct effect on the outcome of the story. The nurse can be seen as a sort of mother figure for the young Juliet. She has been with her ever since she was born, and Juliet values her loving advice. Were her initial response to the pairing of the Capulet and Montague a positive one, Juliet would have been much more likely to pursue the forbidden romance. Apart from merely speaking influential words, the nurse also plays an important role in the progression of the plot through the actions that she takes. Firstly, it is the nurse who initially reveals Juliet's identity to Romeo. It can also be noted that, on more than one occasion, the nurse agrees to meet up with Romeo in order to obtain information and relay messages from Juliet. In act three, scene four, during one of their meetings, the nurse agrees to accept the delivery of a rope ladder so that Romeo may enter Juliet's room in order to marry her. Once Mercutio dies and the nurse's role becomes a tragic one, she still manages to influence the relationship between the two young lovers by losing Juliet's trust by advising her to marry Paris. When Juliet seeks comfort from the nurse, she surprises the young girl by responding that Romeo is not the correct choice for a husband;

I think it best you married with the County.

O, he's a lovely gentleman.

Romeo's a dishclout to him. An eagle, madam,

Hath not so green, so quick, so fair an eye

As Paris hath. Beshrew my very heart,

I think you are happy in this second match,

For it excels your first; or, if it did not,

Your first is dead, or 'twere as good he were

As living here and you no use of him. (III. v. 217 – 225.)

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The nurse knows Juliet well and would be aware of the fact that she is, like Romeo, somewhat of a romantic. To advise her to marry Paris based on the fact that he is better-looking than Romeo says nothing at all to Juliet. Without the support of the nurse, Juliet takes matters into her own hands and loses that small piece of adult guidance that may have been able to prevent the final tragedy from taking place. Therefore, it is clear that the nurse's words and actions are highly influential upon Juliet and her relationship with Romeo.

Mercutio and the nurse are both important characters in *Romeo & Juliet*. Without the nurse, it is arguable that Juliet would have had much more difficulty obtaining information about Romeo, and may not even have followed through with the marriage had it not been for her encouraging words. Similarly, without the death of Mercutio, the story would lack a pivotal point and Romeo would not have been so bloodthirsty towards Tybalt. It is also important to note the effect that these characters have on the viewer's opinion of the protagonists. Certain qualities that are present in the main characters become amplified when they are compared with those opposite qualities that exist within the secondary characters. These contradictory qualities provide the play with a sense of humour and give its first half of the story a comedic sense. Without Mercutio and the nurse, the story of Romeo and Juliet would not be the same as we know it today.

## Works Cited

1. Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. The Arden Shakespeare. Singapore: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd. 1997.

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