

**“Too Soon Marred”: The Nature of Nurturing in Franco Zeffirelli’s  
Adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet***

by Hillary Fogerty

Well, think of marriage now; younger than you  
Here in Verona, ladies of esteem,  
Are made already mothers—by my count—  
I was your mother much upon these years  
That you are now a maid.  
*Romeo and Juliet* (I.iii.71-75)

Given the vast oeuvre of film adaptations of Shakespearean drama, any number of works are amenable to an examination of maternity. For example, exploring Gertrude in *Hamlet* or Queen Elizabeth in *Richard III*, or even Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, from a maternal perspective, *rather* than in terms of their more prominent male counterparts, might yield interesting and otherwise inaccessible results. However, what *Hamlet* does not feature, nor *Richard III*, *Titus Andronicus*, or any number of Shakespeare’s plays and their subsequent adaptations, is the specific relationship cited by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1976) as most “resonant with charges”—the one between a mother and her daughter (225). Only *one* of Shakespeare’s plays explores such a relationship, both broaching the topic of motherhood and highlighting the functions of the reproductive body: *Romeo and Juliet*. Whether as a printed or cinematic text, *Romeo and Juliet* offers a rich view of the connections women forged in relation to the reproductive body through its depiction of Lady Capulet, Juliet, and the Nurse. While the question of Juliet’s readiness for marriage initially brings the women together, her readiness for a life of annual pregnancy and motherhood is just as pertinent. The central role of an aristocratic wife—to produce heirs—collapses marriage and maternity; as the epigraph that begins this essay indicates, within the Shakespearean diegesis, the two states are inseparable.<sup>1</sup>

The complex materiality of early modern mothering plays out powerfully in *Romeo and Juliet*. Importantly, the relationship between biological and surrogate mothering in early modern Europe was no less fraught with potential complications than relationships between biological and surrogate mothering in the twenty first century. The early modern experience of mothering—as explored elsewhere by Adrian Wilson in “The ceremony of childbirth” (1990) and Gail Kern Paster in *The Body Embarrassed* (1993), among others—began with physical confinement, a ritual of female intimacy incorporating the full range of social and physical relationships in which the mother participated and into which her child would have been born. The arrival of a child, especially to a woman of the gentry or nobility, demanded a community of women: gossips to care for the mother during the confinement; midwives to assist with the delivery; wet nurses to feed and care for the newborn. While the gossips called to a mother’s bedside were generally friends or female relatives, and the midwives were short-term

caregivers, the wet nurses initiated long-term employment and a relationship that was sometimes sustained throughout the life of the child. Significantly, as Dorothy McLaren argues in “Maternal fertility and lactation 1570-1720” (1985), the use of wet nurses by “upper-class women” led to increased fertility and “a reproductive pattern of ever-recurrent births” (27). Similarly, Patricia Crawford, in “The construction and experience of maternity in seventeenth-century England” (1990), explains that at the upper levels of society “once married, a woman would on average bear a child every couple of years, or, if she sent her child out to nurse, perhaps once a year” (15). Importantly, “wives were expected to continue childbearing until they produced sons” (Crawford 20). If the duty of the aristocratic woman was to produce heirs, then the duty of the poor woman was to aid the domestic economy of the family and to prevent frequent (and potentially financially devastating) pregnancies. This division of nurturing responsibilities resulted in “rich mothers tied to perpetual pregnancy and poor mothers to perpetual suckling” (McLaren 45). However, beyond issues of patriarchal imperative or class division, what is essential to this illustration of early modern mothering, is the perpetual bond wet nursing often created between two mothers and one child—a triangular relationship fraught with issues of power and interdependency, intimate bodily knowledge and desire, successive separations, weanings, and rejection.

The triangular bond between mother, daughter, and nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* is arguably the defining relationship for each of the three women. However most productions of the play, and indeed the majority of critical work, obfuscate these issues, focusing instead on the heterosexual love relationship between the protagonists. Examining the female relationships within an adaptation offers a rare opportunity to explore how early modern sensibilities find, or fail to find, representation in film. Some adaptations, for example George Cukor’s well known *Romeo and Juliet* (1936) and Baz Luhrmann’s modernized *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996), choose to eliminate the Nurse’s material role as a wet nurse, thereby unnecessarily simplifying all of the female characters in the drama and their relationships to each other. In contrast, as this essay will argue, Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) positions the physical and emotional complexities of mothering as central to all three women. The most useful elucidation of the construction of maternity within the film can be provided by close, methodical textual analysis—specifically of those scenes which introduce the female characters and deal with the question of Juliet marrying Paris—which can offer a contextualized view of the numerous overlapping definitions of the maternal. By engaging with the full range of maternal references in the play script, from lying-in ceremonies to the socially differentiated roles of aristocratic and lower class women’s bodies in patrilineal culture, Zeffirelli’s film offers a glimpse into early modern women’s lives that extends beyond their positions in relation to romantic love.

Even a brief juxtaposition of Zeffirelli’s work with the adaptations of Cukor and Luhrmann highlights the adaptive choices any film production must make in

relation to the ideological constructs of motherhood and the reproductive body. This is most notable in the choice to relegate the nurse to antiquity. In Cukor's adaptation, for example, such limitations are achieved through casting: MGM's contract player Edna May Oliver, "the studio's resident battle-ax," though nurturing, was also asexual and obviously beyond childbearing age.<sup>2</sup> Though she does mention that Juliet is the "prettiest babe that ere [she] nursed" the sense here is *clearly* that of a governess or nursemaid—not a wet-nurse. Further, in costume the nurse resembles a nun, wearing a dark dress and a wimple, and she stoops as she walks, in several scenes employing a cane. Juliet's characterization of "old folks" as "lame" was evidently a factor in constructing the character. Similarly, Baz Luhrmann defined the nurse in his film as a "grandmotherly Hispanic woman."<sup>3</sup> As Alfredo Michel Modenessi (2002) observes, the Nurse "bears more than a passing resemblance to a Mexican 'Nana' turned illegal alien" (77). When the nurse tells Juliet "thou was the prettiest babe that ere I nursed," it is obvious that in this era (ostensibly the 1990's) such nursing can only mean sustenance via a bottle. Interestingly, the Nurse's attire in Luhrmann's adaptation, just as in Cukor's film, is reminiscent of a nun's habit: a plain grey pinstriped smock worn over plain black dress with a white collar, only ornamented with a small gold cross and a large gold watch (the timepiece perhaps signaling her position as a domestic). Her heavy coils of auburn-brown hair, a thick grey shock emanating up from her temple, imply the weight of age and maturity. Despite the able performance of Miriam Margolyes, Luhrmann's nurse demonstrates less influence over Juliet, has less to say, and occupies less screen time than any past rendition of the character. While the play offers support for any number of interpretations of the character, the choice to make the nurse "grandmotherly" in both films clearly changes the context of surrogate mothering.

Contrastively, Zeffirelli's film presents Lady Capulet and the Nurse as women of equivalent age. He also highlights the physical bond between the Juliet and the nurse, which began, unlike other film versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, with nursing. As a result, Zeffirelli's film demonstrates the tensions between Lady Capulet's position as mother and the nurse's position as surrogate more thoroughly and with more complexity than any other adaptation. Further, through the figure of Lady Capulet the film makes visible the limitations imposed on women, especially mothers, in a patrilineal society.

Notably, Zeffirelli's film visually introduces Juliet (Olivia Hussey) at just the moment her father, Capulet (Paul Hardwick), is dismissing the request of Paris (Roberto Biassco) to marry the young girl. Paris's tone is overly inquisitive as he asks: "But *now* my lord, what say you to my suit?" As Capulet replies, "But saying *o're* what I have said *before* . . .," the emphasis in his words encourages the impression that Paris's request has been persistent and repetitive, as has been Capulet's denial. Capulet turns away from Paris toward an open window, and explains tolerantly: "My child is yet a stranger in the world." Capulet looks through the window, below which lighthearted music resonates. As Capulet explains that

Juliet “hath not seen the change of fourteen years” the scene cuts to a point-of-view (POV) long shot of the girl in question, visible through the courtyard windows. She is playing energetically and laughing loudly. The scene cuts from the long shot of Juliet—plainly a child—to a close up reaction shot of Paris, who looks on admiringly, to a two shot of Paris and Capulet. As Capulet begins to close the window, his emphatic gesture both interrupts Paris’s view and dismisses his suit for Juliet’s hand in marriage. Capulet explains: “let two more summers wither in their pride, ‘ere we may think her ripe to be a bride.” Paris presses the point. He explains “younger than *she* are happy mothers made,” as he looks through the window toward where Juliet was standing. His inflection signals that Juliet is not unique, and that marriages between girls of thirteen and significantly older men are not uncommon. Paris’s tone challenges Capulet’s understanding of Juliet, who is not yet “ripe” to be a bride, with his own desire to “make” her a mother.

Capulet responds by raising a chiding finger toward Paris, laughing, and looking through the window to see his visibly dissatisfied wife across the courtyard. As one of the musicians, still playing and tuning an instrument below, draws a particularly loud and discordant note on the violin, the camera zooms in for a close up: Lady Capulet (Natasha Parry) in a POV shot catching her husband’s (i.e. the camera’s) eye. Clearly annoyed, she claps the window in front of her closed. The camera cuts back to the medium shot of the men in the hall as Capulet replies, both to Paris and in reaction to his wife: “too soon marred are those so early made.” Placing his hands on Paris’s shoulders in a fatherly manner, Capulet sighs “the earth hath swallowed all my hopes but she, she is the hopefully lady of my earth.” The tension between their differing perceptions of Juliet—whether simply a child or a ready bride and mother—is apparent; but despite his misgivings Capulet tells Paris to “woo her” and “get her heart” because his “consent is but a part.” However, in contrast to other films, where Paris is clearly encouraged, here Capulet seems to be appeasing Paris in an obligatory, almost polite manner. It is a politic concession.

More pertinently, Zeffirelli’s visual construction of this scene suggests that Capulet’s disapproval of the match stems from experience. The “marred” wife is, quite evidently, his own. Whether he regards this as a marring of spirit or of body is ambivalent, though both are possibilities. Juliet is the only heir. Therefore Lady Capulet, despite her relatively young age (given the logic of the film she should be between twenty six and thirty), has either lost her other children or has not successfully produced another. In *Shakespeare on Film* Jack Jorgens, argues that “Capulet’s remark to Paris that Juliet will be his only heir and, later, his joking lament for his lost youth at the ball suggest that he is impotent” (83). Historically, however, the lack of an heir, especially a male heir, suggested not the husband’s impotence, but the potential barrenness of the wife. The fault and inadequacy would have been understood as hers. For instance, Crawford confirms that “a childless woman was labeled a barren woman. . . . Barren wives lacked social status and respect, and the higher their social position, the unhappier was their

lot" (19). Potentially, Capulet's suggestion that the "earth hath swallowed" his hopes could refer directly to the body of Lady Capulet, figuring her womb as a literal burial site, "swallowing" his seed and killing potential heirs, but successfully conceiving no more children. (Notably, Capulet's words could also be read as her refusal to bear more children, and in doing so *metaphorically* swallowing/burying his potential heirs, an image employed in several of Shakespeare's sonnets and in Romeo's words regarding Rosaline). Significantly, in contrast to Lady Capulet, Juliet may still be a "happy [mother] made." In the logic of an early modern patrilineal society, a "happy" mother produces heirs; she gives birth to sons.

In many ways, the initial image Zeffirelli offers of Lady Capulet—an image explicitly rendered as Lord Capulet's POV—circumscribes discussion of the character. Critical responses to Zeffirelli's Lady Capulet generally harbor the impulse to denigrate the mother as a method of idealizing the daughter. For example, Deborah Cartmell, who discusses sexuality within Shakespeare films in *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen* (2000), offers the window framed image of Lady Capulet as an example of Zeffirelli's employment of "the gaze" with female characters. Cartmell suggests that when "Lady Capulet looks disgustingly at her husband" it is an attempt to "incriminate and/or account for" her motivation" (43). Importantly, how the viewer sees Lady Capulet (as the camera assumes Capulet's disillusioned point of view) seems to slip easily from disgusted to disgusting. Jorgens, for example, begins by defining the character negatively: she is "still young, vain about her looks" (83). Similarly, in *Shakespeare Remains* Courtney Lehmann notes her "primping and preening" (135). Michael Basile's "Teaching Mothers in *Romeo and Juliet*: Lady Capulet, from Brooke to Luhrman," takes this reading even further, arguing that "Zeffirelli's chief contribution to the development of the mother-daughter relationship in *Romeo and Juliet* was to cast the mother as relatively young, decidedly attractive, and still in her *sexual prime*" because "suddenly the mother-daughter relationship seems further complicated by an implied competition for *breeding rights*" (129-130, emphasis added). Though Basile's suggestion that Lady Capulet's youth and beauty delineate her position as competition with Juliet seems a gross misreading of the film, his conclusions highlight an important critical trend. The recognition that Lady Capulet may have her own sexual impulses—she is in "her sexual prime"—is undermined by an unquestioned (and perhaps unconscious) intimation that the only purpose of such sexuality is (and should be) her reproductive duties as a wife: "breeding."

Importantly, Zeffirelli's choices in depicting Lady Capulet, given his interpretation of the physical relationship between the three women, highlight the conflicting social and patriarchal demands to which women/ mothers were subject. Zeffirelli cuts directly from Capulet's discussion with Paris regarding Juliet's readiness for marriage to a scene of Lady Capulet in her bedroom. Several servants, including the nurse (Pat Heywood), are preparing the lady of the house for the ball: applying her makeup, attending to her clothing, affixing her headdress. As the nurse goes in search of Juliet the other servants respond with smiles and

chuckles to her oaths—“by my maidenhead!”—while Lady Capulet crossly reminds them to return to their preparations. Pipes and flutes greet Juliet’s entrance (the same sort of folksy music that was being rehearsed earlier, though it is non-diegetic here). Juliet is energetic, happy, spry: all the things that her mother so clearly is not. As Juliet runs toward her mother’s room the nurse busily follows, fixing her hair and smoothing her clothes—Juliet’s appearance is the nurse’s responsibility. The nurse’s entreaties are repetitive: “your mother, your lady mother, make haste girl, make haste. Where were you?” Both the nurse and Juliet are worried about displeasing Lady Capulet. The lighthearted music continues until Juliet enters Lady Capulet’s bedchamber, at which point the instruments shift from pipes and tabors to strings, and the tempo slows. The tune is identical, but the tone changes from gleeful to somber in a moment, ending with a long, slowly drawn violin note. Throughout the film, as in this instance, musical cues for Lady Capulet are dark and contemplative.

The camera captures the bedchamber in a slight high angled establishing shot with Lady Capulet at the center of the frame, regal in long velvet maroon robes and a high headdress. The two girls attending her are of Juliet’s age or slightly older, too young for their appointed task—the first of the film’s many indications that Lady Capulet has not yet established herself as an effective “lady mother” of either her daughter or her household. As Lady Capulet asks the young women to leave, the nurse turns to them, speaking in the same tone with which she addressed Juliet: “make haste girls, come on then.” She shares an easy rapport with the young women, and influences them in a manner that Lady Capulet cannot. Although Lady Capulet sends the nurse from the room a moment later she does not leave, but stands hovering between the adjacent doors. Lady Capulet looks over her daughter’s face for a brief, uncomfortable moment. When she quickly gestures for the nurse to return it is as if she is not used to speaking to her daughter alone. Importantly, though Lady Capulet invites the nurse back into the room, it is plain she does not welcome the other woman’s presence.

The clearest conflict between the nurse and Lady Capulet in the scene originates in their relative physical intimacy with Juliet. Juliet and her mother demonstrate little physical closeness; any attempt at such is awkward or foreshortened. The uncomfortable relationship between mother and daughter is in sharp contrast to the easy bodily intimacy between the nurse and Juliet. For example, Lady Capulet, smiling warmly at her daughter, says “thou knowest my daughter is of a pretty age.” She holds Juliet by the shoulders, examining her daughter’s features, but she never fully hugs her or holds her. Significantly, the nurse crosses into the frame, reaching around Juliet’s shoulder with an arm from behind, and displaces Lady Capulet’s hand with her own. She exclaims, “Faith! I can tell her age to an hour.” In contrast to Lady Capulet, the nurse embraces Juliet, kisses her repeatedly, pats her cheek, holds the girl on her lap and swats her bottom affectionately; her relationship with Juliet is one not only of nurturance, but of a reciprocal physical need for intimacy.

The tension between the two older women becomes more evident when the nurse begins the story of her own, biological, daughter. As the nurse reminisces—"Susan and she were of an age"—Lady Capulet, annoyed and rolling her eyes, turns away. The reality of the other child is made more palpable when the nurse looks contemplatively at a portrait on the locket around her neck, crossing herself as Juliet watches. There is no indication that Susan (who within the diegesis of the film had to live long enough for the nurse to get a picture painted of her) died before Juliet was born. However, Susan was "too good for me" sighs the nurse; the infant's death left Juliet as her only charge. Significantly, this is the only film adaptation that is explicit in defining the nurse as a wet-nurse, and further, as Juliet's "only nurse." When, a bit later in the scene, the nurse refers to her own breast as "thy teat"—demarcating her own body as Juliet's property or possession—she both validates her continued position in Juliet's life and lays claim to the superiority of her surrogate mother-daughter bond.

Because of Zeffirelli's choices in adapting the play, the sense of the nurse's "remembering" in this scene is *not* specific to Juliet's weaning, which is never mentioned. Rather, the nurse seems to refer Juliet's *actual birth* "On Lammas Eve," which she remembers "well." The nurse's claim, "I can tell her age to an hour," claims knowledge not only of Juliet's birthday, but also the night of her birth. She is rendered, in effect, Lady Capulet's former "gossip."<sup>4</sup> The nurse knows, to an hour, when the child was born, and she proceeds to explain how she keeps track and remembers the girl's birthday. Her claim, "to an hour," reinforces the division of nurturing labor. If the nurse claims knowledge "to an hour" of Juliet's birth, then the mother was displaced within that hour, her role interrupted by the nurse's surrogate mothering and subsequent wet-nursing. Further, with these words the Nurse implies that Lady Capulet does not remember the birth of her own daughter particularly well. Within the diegesis the nurse's suggestions imply that she is such a competent mother that she can remember her own child's birth (the deceased "Susan"), as well as Juliet's, and was fully prepared to care for both girls. The nurse, with more and more excitement, remembers the details of the event—again, in the play this is Juliet's weaning, but here the dialogue suggests Juliet's birth—exclaiming "my lord and you were then at . . . Mantua!"

The story of the nurse's late child (and late husband) is a source of displeasure for Lady Capulet. She grows increasingly aggravated as the nurse reminisces. When she finally interrupts with an annoyed demand—"enough of this, I pray thee hold thy peace"—her words are directed both at the nurse's bawdy jokes (which cause Juliet, who understands, to giggle) and at her memory of domestic bliss and family life, all of which may be the intended target of Lady Capulet's frustration. When the nurse stops laughing, she turns to Lady Capulet and, momentarily chided, wryly says "Yes, Madam." The pause here provides an interesting moment for interpretation. The command and response demonstrate the problematic tension in their relationship; Lady Capulet's attempts to establish

authority over her daughter and within her household are trumped repeatedly by the nurse.

A shot reverse shot editing pattern demonstrates this tension a moment later. Lady Capulet turns to her daughter, “Now . . . Juliet,” reaching out again to take the girl by the shoulders. The reverse shot is of the nurse, who begins to laugh again. Only halfheartedly stifling the noise with her apron, she says happily to Juliet “thou was the prettiest babe that e’er I nursed” as she throw her arms wide, inviting the girl’s embrace. The reverse shot shows Lady Capulet has moved farther back from her daughter, who quickly extends her arms and runs to sit on the nurse’s lap. Her reassuring comment to the girl—who was the “prettiest babe” and therefore prettier than Susan—once again establishes Juliet as the unconditional center of the nurse’s life.

When the subject of marriage is finally broached a moment later, Lady Capulet extends her arms again, walking toward Juliet while inquiring: “Tell me, daughter Juliet, how stands your disposition to be married?” Rather than running to her mother’s open arms, Juliet turns and looks to the nurse for guidance. She seems overwhelmed by the suggestion. Her reply “it is an honour that I dream not of” seems entirely true—she has never considered it. Juliet’s reply clearly pleases the nurse, who clasps her in a tight embrace, kissing her on the cheek, patting her face and repeating Juliet’s “honour” emphatically: “An *honour!* Were not I thine only nurse, I would say thou sucked wisdom from thy teat.” In describing Juliet’s answer as “wisdom,” the nurse suggests two possibilities, first that Juliet is truly not ready for marriage, or, more plausibly, that the girl has responded appropriately to her mother’s question. Breaking into their conversation, the nurse reinforces her role as mediator between Juliet’s comprehension and her mother’s words, interrupting both physically and discursively. Lady Capulet has no opportunity to respond. Her understanding of her daughter’s situation and reaction to it are thus also a response to the nurse’s interruption. Any demonstration of approval or physical affection that Lady Capulet might exhibit is eclipsed by the nurse’s characteristic lack of inhibition.

Lady Capulet responds negatively, both physically and verbally, to the nurse’s enthusiasm, crossing to her daughter and pulling her from the other woman’s embrace. Lady Capulet places her right arm around Juliet’s shoulders, and pulling her close with her left hand says “well, think of marriage now.” The camera pans left, following the two women as they walk toward the door. Lady Capulet continues with the same timbre: “Younger than you—here in Verona, ladies of *esteem*, are made *already* mothers.” She emphasizes the commonness of the event, and the fact that to become a young mother is not a mark against reputation, but in favor of it. Lady Capulet claims motherhood, and by virtue of this juxtaposition her own position as a mother, as an experience through which “ladies of esteem” in Verona *are made*. Marriage would force Juliet’s entrée into a world of adult responsibility, away from the nursery and into the aristocratic society of Verona. As they stand in the doorway, Lady Capulet’s voice rises, high

and girlish, while she explains, “By my count, I was your mother *much* upon these years that *you* are now a maid.” Lady Capulet’s enthusiasm in paralleling her own experience with Juliet’s potential future denotes an eagerness to welcome her daughter into the sphere of women’s communal events, including the ceremonies of childbirth. As an aristocratic wife, Juliet would immediately have interests in common with her mother, potentially strengthening the bond between them.

The choices in framing as Lady Capulet shares her history intensify the sense of divisiveness in the household. Initially, Zeffirelli frames the mother and daughter in a medium close two-shot just inside the bedroom, with the nurse pushed completely out of the frame. As Lady Capulet speaks Juliet looks at her intently; the worry, perhaps even fear, in the girl’s face is clear. The suggestion of marriage, and its honors, shifted quickly to motherhood. However, before can Juliet answer the camera cuts to another angle from just outside the door, framing the nurse and Juliet together at the doorway with the audience’s view of Lady Capulet blocked by the doorframe. The nurse interrupts Lady Capulet’s “count” of the years since she became a mother, crying: “Oh Yes! I remember . . . .” The issue of remembrance is significant because the nurse essentially suggests that she remembers not only Juliet’s birth, but the “younger” lady of esteem, Lady Capulet, in her early days of marriage and maternity. Her interruption, “I remember,” underscores the longevity of tensions between the two women and illustrates the potentially disruptive effect of the nurse’s continued presence in the household.

The framing assists in creating the narrative tension by pushing one or another of the women out of the scene. For example, Lady Capulet’s most emphatic dismissal of the nurse—a determined cry “Thus, in brief”—is accompanied by her most emphatic movement, guiding Juliet in front of her with an arm around the girl’s shoulders. The camera pans left, following Lady Capulet’s movement and leaving the nurse out of the frame. However, each time Lady Capulet seeks to introduce the “valiant Paris” as an option for Juliet, the nurse crosses into the frame, coming between Juliet and her mother, interrupting their physical bond. Lady Capulet drops Juliet’s arm as the nurse comes between them, loud and almost obnoxious in her competitiveness. She claims Juliet’s attention by intoning enthusiastically “a man young lady! Such a man!” Finally, Lady Capulet shushes her, and the nurse recedes, momentarily humbled. Lady Capulet reaches out and puts her fingers gently under Juliet’s chin, encouraging her not to look down or away, but to look her mother in the eyes: “what say you? Can you love the gentleman?” Juliet immediately turns to her nurse to seek an answer, but Lady Capulet, growing more austere, redirects Juliet’s vision to herself. However, the nurse steps forward, leaning over Lady Capulet’s shoulder, into Juliet’s line of sight. At this moment, Juliet would be forced to make a choice between the two women, but a servant (Peter in this film), interrupts with news that the party is underway. Lady Capulet is distracted, in a hurry, and noticeably cheered by the interruption. Juliet’s answer, while “brief” at her mother’s behest,

is not quick. She looks again to the nurse for direction, and for approval in the appropriateness of the answer she has provided to her mother. Even after her mother bids her emphatically to follow—“Juliet, the county stays”—she remains for the nurse’s instruction. (See Fig. 1).



Figure 1.  
Redirecting Juliet

Lady Capulet (Natasha Parry) attempts to redirect the attention of her daughter Juliet (Olivia Hussey) away from the Nurse (Pat Heywood). This image used with permission of the copyright holder (Paramount Pictures).

The conflict between Juliet’s deferral to the nurse’s desires and opinions and those of Lady Capulet grows substantially throughout the film—most obviously in the nurse’s assistance of Juliet’s clandestine marriage. However, the struggle between the two older women for dominance, both within the household and in relation to Juliet, climaxes when Juliet refuses to marry Paris. The first shot in the scene is a relatively long take (over a minute). Rather than employing editing to capture reaction shots, the camera focuses on Lady Capulet. In full mourning attire with a black dress and veil, she paces through the sheer white canopied curtains that frame Juliet’s enormous bed. Zeffirelli achieves an effect akin to a split screen through the use of the sheer curtains, which occasionally act as a scrim to separate Lady Capulet from the camera, with the nurse listening on the other side. As she begins to speak we cannot see her clearly, but her anger is palpable: “we will have vengeance for it. Fear thou not.” Pulling in and panning left, the camera follows her movements around the bed. She paces between the curtains, intermittently shielded and exposed, resembling a caged animal tracing the bars. Juliet sobs loudly—at times unseen and at others just the hint of a crumpled body at the bottom edge of the screen—occasionally crying out “Oh!”

or “No!” as her mother carefully explains her plan. When Lady Capulet says “then weep no more” she appears disturbed, and holds her hand at her forehead. Her tone and actions demonstrate an inability to deal with Juliet, whose reaction is solely one of grief and lament, whilst her own reaction to Tybalt’s death is unremitting fury. Though her words here are in keeping with the play, Zeffirelli’s film is unique in retaining them; of twentieth century filmmakers, he alone provides a Lady Capulet willing to have Romeo murdered. Her tone, harsh and determined, leaves us with little doubt that she would, and could, carry forth on her plan to find someone in Mantua to “give him such an unaccustomed dram that he shall soon keep Tybalt company.” In a reaction shot, the nurse’s face registers the surprise and fear that Juliet, off camera and buried in pillows, cannot. The nurse’s stunned expression indicates the profundity of Lady Capulet’s change in behavior—she is not hesitant, she is unwavering, she will not be interrupted.

However, just as Lady Capulet is strengthened by resolve, so too is her newly married daughter. As Lady Capulet explains the wedding plans to Juliet the camera pulls forward, over the older woman’s shoulder and into a medium close shot of the tearful young girl. The frame captures her in her bed, with the wooden headboard at the left of the screen, and the nurse entering from the left. The white linen bed sheets and Juliet’s white smock contrast starkly with the nurse’s black dress and Lady Capulet’s formal mourning attire. She reacts to her mother’s words with unrestrained anger: “Now by St. Peter’s church and Peter too, he shall not make me there a joyful bride!” Her tone is harsh, her beautiful young face contorted and ugly. Her words register as both curse and obscenity; her expression reinforces this notion. Notably, Juliet’s reaction diverges absolutely from every public moment or prior exchange with her mother—all of which were composed, measured, and polite. Given the relationship established up to this point within the film, the virulent wail at her mother is wholly unexpected. She screams and spits her words; the anger which was so evident in her mother is now evident in Juliet. Because we do not get a reaction shot here of her mother, who within the diegesis can only be shocked by this behavior—so far out of character given how Juliet has acted in the past—we are not certain of her response. The nurse’s position throughout this portion of the scene is interesting; she is restrained and does not interfere. She doesn’t say anything or attempt to comfort Juliet until it is clear that the girl has rejected Lady Capulet. As Juliet cries, burying her face in the pillows, the nurse finally intervenes to comfort her, looking with consternation at Lady Capulet.

The scene transitions from Juliet’s bedroom to the stairway outside, where Capulet is bidding adieu to Paris and conferring with him regarding the impending marriage. Lady Capulet, who is blocked from Paris’s view, descends the stairs shaky and crying. The only time she cries in the entire film is after Juliet has yelled at her. While Capulet parts with Paris fondly, her face registers disgust. Rather than forcing Juliet into marriage, Lady Capulet seems to believe that the feud and vengeance for Tybalt are more important matters. Capulet asks whether she has “delivered our decree” and she steels herself visibly against the

coming barrage. She whimpers in between her words as she responds to him. It is important that throughout the first portion of their exchange Lord and Lady Capulet stand alone on the stairs. Juliet is upstairs, behind closed doors; in contrast to the staging suggested by the play script, she is out of hearing of her father. Upon learning of his daughter's refusal, he ascends the stairs in a fury, shouting at his wife that Juliet is "proud" and "unworthy." When she responds tearfully "I would the fool were married to her grave," the lines are delivered, significantly, to Lord Capulet—*not* to Juliet and *not* in Juliet's presence. Her words are almost a threat; she wishes that Capulet's only heir, his only child, were dead. Whether a "grave" is preferable to, or synonymous with, her own marriage with Capulet, or whether a "grave" would be preferable to or synonymous with a marriage to the likeminded Paris is uncertain. However, Lady Capulet speaks these words in grief and in reaction to Juliet's uncharacteristic anger. Further, she addresses her husband, who ostensibly has the most to lose if the marriage does not proceed, and not her daughter. With a fevered pitch he exclaims "let *me* see her!" The implication is that Capulet can explain things to his daughter in a manner of which his wife is not capable. Indeed, her expression as she trails behind him and later in Juliet's bedroom fluctuates between nervous anxiety and inadequacy. She cannot perform the tasks required of her by her husband. That these tasks may be unpalatable, or even abhorrent to her, does not matter.

Within Juliet's bedroom Capulet embodies the patriarch—when his fingers "itch" he throws Juliet across her room and against the wall. He doesn't listen to her pleas, rather he speaks over her words and responds with violence. Significantly, after the exchange with her husband, Lady Capulet's earlier aggressive impulses have deflated completely. She does not step forward to protect her daughter; the nurse does. The nurse stands in front of Juliet's cowering body, physically blocking Capulet's access to the girl. He grabs at the nurse's arms and clothing, trying to pull her out of his way. Zeffirelli cuts between medium shots of the three adults—Lady Capulet hanging back, uncertain, the nurse, willing to defend Juliet in the face of violence, and Lord Capulet, angry and gesticulating wildly—and close-ups of Juliet, on her knees with a teary face, clinging to her nurse's skirts. (In fact, the only attempt Lady Capulet makes to intervene actually registers as an attempt to protect the nurse.)

When Lord Capulet turns to leave the room, shouting at Juliet that he will not be "foresworn," we see Lady Capulet in her most telling, and childlike, moment. She is a bit shaky, leaning against a wooden bureau and looking at her husband with annoyed resignation. She sighs deeply, and her shoulders heave. She rests her hand on her cheek, and her stance resembles an adolescent, receiving punishment. The power and certainty she exhibited in demanding vengeance for Tybalt's death have disappeared. Instead she is the "too soon marred" inadequate child-bride, unable to control her daughter or satisfy her husband's demands. This sense of her inadequacy is echoed moments later when, after Capulet exits, the nurse gestures emphatically that Lady Capulet's presence is also unnecessary and unwanted. In dismissing her mistress the nurse makes

evident her superior claim to Juliet's affections and her greater concern for the girl's physical welfare. In this moment of crisis Lady Capulet's role as a mother—to produce an heir but *not* to nurture her, *not* to make decisions on her behalf, and *not* to question her function in a patrilineal society—is unmistakable. (See Fig. 2)



Figure 2.

Lady Capulet looks on

Lady Capulet (Natasha Parry) looks on sheepishly as Lord Capulet (Paul Hardwick) chastises Juliet for refusing Paris. This image used with permission of the copyright holder (Paramount Pictures).

Then again, a nurse's position of power in a household was only as secure as her ability to satisfy the physical needs of a child *on demand*.<sup>5</sup> When Juliet's nurse suggests a few moments later that the girl would be prudent in marrying Paris, she too exceeds the bounds of her prescribed role. Unlike the aristocratic mother, a wet nurse's duty is to nourish and gratify the *child*. In defying Juliet's demands, the Nurse symbolically replicates the rejection of sustenance she enacted many years before when, as described in the play, she "laid wormwood to [her] dug" (1.3.28) in order to wean Juliet. The bodily separation and weaning of Juliet from the nurse that is *not* articulated in the earlier scene (which rather presents the women as remaining physically interdependent) occurs here. Juliet, suddenly dissembling, informs her nurse haughtily that she will go to confession. The nurse moves toward Juliet as if to embrace her, saying "this is wisely done" as she reaches up to smooth the girl's hair. The nurse's actions suggest that she believes the girl has once again "sucked wisdom" from her "teat." However, Juliet shrinks angrily away from the older woman, walking around the bed and shouting "Go!" Juliet's defiant face registers an absolute dismissal. The nurse looks at her

with shock and confusion. Her exit from the room conveys an acceptance of her position as a subordinate; she backs out of the door, bowing her head submissively as she closes the doors.

Essentially, Juliet has long been the nurse's only source of physical contact and pleasure, despite the cessation of her role in providing bodily sustenance to the girl. Ceding her role as confidant and caregiver to Juliet, or to Juliet's potential children, threatens her own physical wellbeing. Similarly, all of Lady Capulet's efforts at physical contact are directed at children, whether her daughter or her nephew, Tybalt. Her inability to achieve intimacy with her daughter is compounded by the constant visual reminder of the nurse's close relationship with the girl. While portions of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* undoubtedly function as a tragic love story, examining the film from a maternal perspective calls attention to the stark reality of women's positions in patrilineal society—positions which the film renders tragic. The film visually realizes what Paster refers to as the "two forms of motherhood institutionalized in Elizabethan culture" (225); both forms existed contributed to the patriarchal hierarchy which separated the heir bearing womb of the biological mother from the undifferentiated breast of the surrogate mother.

Critical analyses of *Romeo and Juliet* (whether of this film in particular or the play in general) that focus exhaustively on the heterosexual love story have not adequately recognized the subtle portrayal of women's bodily roles and the physicality of maternal bonds that Zeffirelli's adaptation achieves. The insight a focus on maternity can provide, whether examining a particular adaptation or the play script itself, cannot be understated. Identifying and acknowledging the power of the maternal within literature and film can serve both as an intentional subversion of continued patriarchal definitions and as a corrective to often homogenous critical interpretation.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the role of feeding the child collapses the identity of the nurturer and her occupation: she becomes simply “nurse.” This act of naming not only compels femininity and heterosexuality in the material circumstances of the lactating body, it also compels the confused synecdoche of breast and body / nurse and nurture and the continued subjugation of a poor woman to the family of employ and the “on demand” whims of the child.

<sup>2</sup> Gavin Lambert, *Norma Shearer: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 223.

<sup>3</sup> Baz Luhrmann, DVD-Rom screenplay of *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Later, when Capulet attempts to dismiss the nurse, he addresses her as a “gossip” twice. The first instance, “Good Prudence, smatter with your gossips, go” (3.5.170), refers to her in the familiar sense of a talkative woman. The second occurrence, “Peace, you mumbling fool! / Utter your gravity o’er a gossip’s bowl, / For here we need it not” (3.5.172-4), refers more specifically to the role of a gossip during the lying-in ceremony. During the labor and delivery of a child, gossips would prepare “caudle,” which Adrian Wilson defines in “The ceremony of childbirth and its interpretation” (in Fildes, 108-121), as a “special drink which was associated with childbirth, consisting of ale or wine, warmed with sugar and spices. The mother drank the caudle to keep up her strength and spirits . . . the gossips kept themselves busy by maintaining the supply.” Thus a “gossip’s bowl” would contain the drink used to ease pain and comfort a woman in labor, while the accompanying “gravity” Capulet refers to derisively would likely be advice related to childbirth.

<sup>5</sup> Paster suggests that “suckling on demand seems to have been the norm both in theory and, insofar as it can be documented, in practice.” She explains that “this practice subordinated the nurse to the baby’s needs and schedule” and “may have been what worded most to separate babies from their mothers and tie them to their nurses, at least until weaning and extrusion/return” (224). Further, for the nurse herself, the “physical and emotional subordination to the baby directly result[s] from her social [and economic] subordination to the parents” (224).