

Are you my mother? an analysis of juliet's nurse

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Most modern children grow up listening to their mothers tell fairytales and other fictional stories, but what did they do before the time of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White? In earlier centuries, it was not uncommon for care of small children to be delegated to an aristocratic mother's servants and subordinates. As displayed in *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, the actual mother in the tragedy provides minimal care to her daughter, Juliet. The Nurse, a prized servant in the Capulet household, was originally given the job of caring for Juliet as a baby, doing chores such as nursing her. But as Juliet grew older, the Nurse continued to care for Juliet like she would have cared for her own daughter. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's mother was truly not a mother figure at all.

Taking the role of "mother" in the play is Juliet's servant, known as the Nurse. When the Nurse first appears, she immediately gives off the feeling that she is an endearing character with a bright personality. The reader's first meeting with her is during her telling of a comical story of Juliet as a young girl. "'Yea,' quoth he, 'dost thou fall upon thy face?/ Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit;/ Wilt thou not, Jule?' And, by my holiday,/ The pretty wretch left crying and said 'Ay.'" (Act I, scene iii). The story refers to a time when Juliet was just learning to walk and toppled over. As the Nurse's husband helped the child up, he made a relatively sexual comment referring to how she will one day lie on her back for a man. This is the first time the reader gets a taste of the Nurse's comical character, which she carries with her throughout the story. Because the Nurse was in fact so humorous and easy-going, it was easy for Juliet to come and talk to her in

her times of troubles, which is more than can be said about her actual mother, with whom she converses very little during the play.

Times of trouble came often for Juliet. Her secret marriage to Romeo created a barrier between her parents and her, which in turn drove her to discuss her issues with the Nurse. As Juliet said, " My only love, sprung from my only hate!" (Act I, scene v) referring to the enmity between Juliet and Romeo's families. Juliet's love for Romeo and her relatives' preconceived hatred of him place an even greater distance between Juliet and her mother. Along with the Friar, the Nurse was the " middleman" in Romeo and Juliet's relationship. A quote by Juliet explains the Nurse's role in connecting the two lovers: " My words would bandy her to my sweet love,/ And his to me," (Act II, scene v). Despite the will of the rest of the household, the Nurse was always incredibly helpful and supportive of Romeo and Juliet's love, until the day when yet another barrier arose.

To make the situation of secret marriage even worse, Lord and Lady Capulet set up an arranged marriage between Juliet and Paris, and being disowned was Juliet's only other option. After Juliet's pleas to not marry him, the Nurse became an advocate for Juliet and stood up to Juliet's own father: " You are to blame, my lord, to rate her so," (Act III, scene v). At that point in the story, the reader truly gets a sense of the extent of the bond between Juliet and the Nurse. After growing up with Juliet, the Nurse grew closer to her and began thinking of herself as less of a servant to Juliet and more of a mother.

But where was Juliet's actual mother during all of her struggles? Juliet's mother makes very few appearances in the course of the action, most of

which are insignificant. There was a profound distance between her and her daughter, and it was a distance that, in the end, contributed to Juliet's death. At a time when the Nurse stepped in for Juliet, Juliet's mother did just the opposite. During the dispute about marrying Paris, Juliet's mother sided with her husband. She, too, joined with her husband in willingness to alienate Juliet: "Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word/ Do as thou wilt, for I am done with thee," (Act III, scene v).

There in the hour of need, supportive of a sensitive young woman's actions, and available for comic relief, the Nurse is genuinely the image of a "mother figure" in *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Through Juliet's childhood and adolescent years, the Nurse cared for Juliet like her own in more ways than one; as depicted onstage, the relationship between the Nurse and Juliet is certainly one of the most secure and humane bonds in the whole play. Possessing every quality a true mother should, the Nurse was indeed the closest person Juliet had to a mother.