and death. However, the pun on ‘flower’ and the operatic repetition of Death pose particular problems for an actor, particularly on the modern stage, before audiences who find such ritualized expressions of grief rather alien. In production, the moment is also richly ironic, not just because Juliet is alive but also because she is often seen lying on the bed which she has recently shared with her lover, Capulet’s unknown son-in-law. He says far more than he can possibly realize, as the audience subsequently discover. Romeo’s final address to his ‘dead’ lover in the Capulet family tomb will continue and develop these ironies, fixing permanently the image of Death as her lover. Indeed, as will be demonstrated in the close analysis of the play’s final scenes, Shakespeare will re-deploy the imagery of defloweration and of death-as-lover in such a way that they are greatly enriched.

3 THE LOVER’S COMPANIONS AND THE DRAMATIC CONTEXT

It is clear, therefore, that Shakespeare achieves a kind of harmony through variety in the play’s language and imagery. The technique used is essentially comic, with many parallels to be found in the comedies of the same period. For example, Love’s Labour’s Lost also brings together a lavish variety of distinctive languages, from the courtly sonneteering of the Lords – which is not unlike Romeo’s early style – to the blank incomprehension of Constable Dull. All are combined in a ‘great feast of languages’ that at the end of the play almost achieves the harmony of a comic resolution, only to be deferred by the intrusion of death. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream Hippolyta provides the most familiar and succinct summary of the technique, by describing the various cries of Theseus’s hunting hounds as ‘musical discord ... sweet thunder’. However, such a technique is by no means the only one by which Shakespeare seeks to control the audience’s responses to the story of the two lovers. As T. J. B. Spencer
describes it in his introduction to the New Penguin edition of the play (1967):

‘we observe the progressive isolation both of Juliet and of Romeo in their environments. Their love gradually separates them from their friends and families’. (p. 28)

The linguistic aspect of this isolation is evident in the perceived lack of artifice in the style of the two lovers, a style assessed by one of the play’s most distinguished translators, Boris Pasternak, thus: ‘love has no need of euphony . . . truth, not sound, dwells in its heart’ (quoted by Levin in ‘Form and Formality’, p. 109). Of course this apparent simple sincerity is actually achieved by contrast with the even more elaborate artifice of the styles seen in the first act of the play and, therefore, is the result of skilfully concealed craft. One small indication of this craft is the way that Shakespeare concentrates the use of rhymed verse in the first act, which is abandoned almost entirely in the central acts, which contain the lovers’ exchanges, only to reappear after the lovers’ deaths in the re-established formality of the final reconciliations.

Aside from such purely stylistic devices, Shakespeare also guides our emotional responses through the lovers’ isolation from their friends, and in this the figures of Mercutio and the Nurse loom large. The two characters have a good deal in common, each acting as both a foil and a companion/adviser to one of the two lovers. In the Cambridge edition to the play G. Blakemore Evans has suggested that it is their ‘easy opportunism’ that ultimately contrasts most starkly with the lovers’ ‘complete commitment to an ideal’ (p. 23).

In creating the Nurse, Shakespeare accepted the broad outlines of his source, Arthur Brooke’s verse romance, Romeus and Juliet. However, whereas Brooke is unambiguous about the Nurse’s age, referring to her as ‘olde’ and ‘ancient’, Shakespeare is far less clear. In his play she is both ‘auncient damnation’ and yet young enough to have suckled Juliet. Naturally this creates significant difficulties on the stage – difficulties which may be less obvious from reading the play, since a director does not have the luxury of such ambiguity; a decision must be made about who is to play the role. Traditional representations, including most famously Edith