'Hildings and Harlots': Kenneth MacMillan's Romeo and Juliet

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CHAPTER 15

"HILDINGS AND HARLOTS": KENNETH MACMILLAN'S *ROMEO AND JULIET*

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we must have you dance.1

when a ballet succeeds in exploring literary

material, rather than just defining it in dance form,

it's because the choreographer has re-created the

material.2

On February 9th, 1965, the premiere of Kenneth MacMillan's full-length dance adaptation of

William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to a score by Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev took

place at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Performed by the Royal Ballet and starring its

celebrated principals—Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev—the production was met with

forty-three curtain calls and hailed by critics as a milestone for MacMillan as a choreographer.3 It

was filmed by Paul Czinner in 1966 with the original cast—the first of several films of the

work—and remains a mainstay of the Royal Ballet's repertoire in addition to being performed by

major dance companies around the world, including American Ballet Theatre, the Royal Swedish

Ballet, the Ballet of La Scala, Milan, and the National Ballet of Japan. Its enduring success is all the more remarkable when one considers the sheer number of dance works based on the same play. The first dance adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* was (purportedly) Eusebio Luzzi's 1785 production, performed in Venice. Many more productions followed and the love story became a popular choice from Shakespeare's canon for dance companies in the twentieth century. Major choreographers—including Leonid Lavrovsky, Frederick Ashton, John Cranko, John Neumeier and Mark Morris—adapted the play, with varying degrees of success. But even the most successful of these works struggles to match the reputation and public approval of MacMillan's 1965 *Romeo and Juliet*. It is, one might argue, the archetypal Shakespearean ballet.

Based on this iconicity, MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* would seem to be the ideal model for examining a successful synthesis of Shakespeare and dance. However, a straightforward mapping of the text onto the dance work, in which we look for incontrovertible evidence of the play's influence, cannot do this translation process justice. In using Shakespeare's drama as the template—identifying what MacMillan retains from the source-text and what he discards—we inevitably make the assumption that the play is more important to the discussion than the ballet. More useful in this context is a closer look at MacMillan's *additions* to the world of the play, additions with no apparent basis or equivalence in the text. It may feel counterintuitive, particularly to the literary critic, to adopt an approach that neglects the Shakespearean source material, but it is perhaps the only method capable of challenging the dominance of the text within scholarship and producing an honest appraisal of adaptive work. This chapter will use the figures of the three harlots in MacMillan's ballet—characters that do not appear in Shakespeare's play—to explore the real, practical, and pragmatic business of adaptation.

The harlots, typically represented by soloists or first soloists within the ballet companies, appear prominently in the work's ensemble scenes. As non-Shakespearean characters, they embody the gap between the source-text and MacMillan's translation. This is a gap worth examining, offering an insight into the creative afterlife of a Shakespearean text and the infidelities that constitute—I would argue—the success of any adaptation. The fact that MacMillan did not 'invent' the figures of the three harlots—they appeared earlier in John Cranko's production of *Romeo and Juliet*—need not diminish the exercise; in fact, it only emphasizes the importance of these three characters. Why MacMillan followed Cranko's lead in this addition and how he adapted the figures for his own purposes are key questions here. By focusing on the three harlots, we can consider issues of authenticity, originality, and the autonomy of the choreographer. This approach also helps us to identify the process at work within the translation of text into movement, a process that challenges any sense of a simple transfer of narrative or character. By approaching the play—and its ballet adaptation—laterally, it is possible to enlarge our view of the two works and to recognise the misconceptions they are routinely subject to. MacMillan's three harlots, despite being absent from Shakespeare's play, teach us how to reassess it. First appearing in a section of the ballet score labelled by Prokofiev as 'The Street Awakens', the harlots inhabit Verona's public spaces and animate them. They draw our attention, not to the play's romantic intimacy, but to its earthy radicalism. As they redirect our gaze and revise our understanding of the play, the three harlots also illuminate the works of their creator.

Certainly, this is an abstruse approach. Not only does it refuse to accept Shakespeare's play as MacMillan's principle reference point but it also overlooks the source of the ballet's success, namely its series of memorable pas de deux. Instead it focusses on the ensemble scenes

in which MacMillan's three harlots appear; but, in doing so, it may offer an unanticipated way back into the text. Entering the play through its choreographic lineage deepens the understanding of a script often neglected by prominent literary critics. *Romeo and Juliet* has historically not inspired the same level of literary criticism as Shakespeare's other tragedies. Naomi Conn Liebler considers this lack of scholarly attention:

> Even critical neglect can seem a kind of commentary: in the twentieth century several important critics were *not* moved to write about this play: A. C. Bradley, Stanley Cavell, Jan Kott, T. S. Eliot, Kenneth Burke, Bertolt Brecht, and we are left to wonder why.4

Critics have rather been moved to sneer, I would suggest, at the play's popularity with the public and its status as love story. Dance writers have been no less critical. Clive Barnes's remark that "*Romeo and Juliet* is a natural for ballet" because it is "well enough known for people not to have to worry about the details"5 suggests that the play is suitable for translation into a movement vocabulary only capable of accommodating a linear plot and a universal theme. Unwittingly perhaps, it is a remark guaranteed to undermine both the literary and the dance work. Despite the assumed thematic universality and resultant popular appeal of Shakespeare, Kenneth MacMillan produced *Romeo and Juliet* not as a conduit for Shakespeare's message, but as a reflection of his own choreographic concerns. Dance and music critic Andrew Porter, writing for the *New Yorker* in 1973, speaks of the "words just below the surface of the dance" in Macmillan's *Romeo and Juliet.* The following discussion challenges this notion of the play as a firm foundation for the ballet and looks instead to disentangle the adaptation from the source. It is an approach that values correlation—what these two associated but independent works tell us about each other and about themselves—over causation and the privileging of source material over adaptive creations.

ADAPTATION VERSUS SOURCE

The first evidence we have of Kenneth MacMillan's non-reliance on the Shakespearean source for *Romeo and Juliet* is the ballet's disregard for narrative detail. The complexities of Juliet's feigned death and the failed effort to inform Romeo of her intentions are passed over. While one might attribute MacMillan's cavalier attitude here to the play's ubiquity within English-speaking culture, as Clive Barnes does, I would suggest that MacMillan is instead producing a version of the plot in which these details are irrelevant and the theatregoer's prior knowledge of the play unnecessary. Indeed, MacMillan's larger body of work hints at the use of literature and literary lives as initial inspiration often followed by a pronounced departure from the source material. His 1978 work for the Stuttgart Ballet—*My Brother, My Sisters*—was originally prompted by MacMillan's interest in the lives of the Brontë family; it became an abstracted and disturbingly psychological study of childhood rivalry, incest, and fratricide. As MacMillan said himself of the work in an interview with John Higgins for *The Times*, "I read something, see something, forget it and then after an interval – four years in this case – it turns up again and is transformed into dance."[6] The transformation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into dance—unlike MacMillan's response to the lives of Bramwell Brontë and his sisters—retains the play's basic narrative but the choreographer's disrespect for the plot's intricacies points to a similar autonomy of vision. Of course, Sergei Prokofiev's music dictates much of the ballet's action. It functions, one could argue, as both score and libretto. But there remains room for creative manoeuvre—the three harlots, for example, are not specified in Prokofiev's score—and MacMillan makes the most of the space between text, score and ballet.[7]

While MacMillan simplifies the plot of the play and removes several named servant figures from the action, he simultaneously adds the character of Rosaline—never seen but passionately eulogised by Romeo in Shakespeare's drama—and the figures of the three harlots to the ballet. The first choreography set to Prokofiev's score, by Leonid Lavrovsky for the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballets in 1940 and 1946 respectively, produced marketplace scenes in line with the composer's colourful ensemble sequences. These were, as Julie Sanders observes, "realized through familiar folkloric tunes – waltzes, minuets, tarantellas and gavottes"[8] and they neatly conformed to the balletic tradition of *divertissements*—dances separate from the work's principal narrative and often embracing a national, or folkloric, flavour. As ballet developed during the twentieth century and embraced naturalism in some quarters, the desire to differentiate characters—even from amongst the corps de ballet—became more pronounced. The three harlots are evidence of this trend and allow MacMillan to develop Lavrovsky's rather generic ensemble work. They also reflect, as Brandon Shaw observes, MacMillan's eagerness "to bring realism to the stage to counter the Royal Ballet's long engagement with what he considered fantastic plots and affected expressions of a limited emotional palate."[9] The harlots take part in the ballet's marketplace scenes, interacting most markedly with Romeo, Mercutio, and Benvolio. Performed by Royal Ballet soloists with a gift for character acting, the harlots stand out immediately as they sit languidly on the stairs at the back of Nicholas Georgiadis's set amongst the bustle of Italian street life. They take the lead in several group dances for Verona's townspeople but clearly have an antagonistic relationship with the women of the community and can be seen touting for business from traders and passers-by. In his depiction of the town square, MacMillan looks not to Shakespeare directly, but to Franco Zeffirelli and his 1960 production of *Romeo and Juliet* for the Old Vic. MacMillan's biographer Jann Parry notes his appropriation of a passing wedding

celebration from Zeffirelli's work and, more generally, MacMillan's ballet echoes the Italian director's representation of the energetic but edgy civic community that forms the backdrop to the lovers' demise.[10]

Macmillan was not only indebted to Franco Zeffirelli for the verisimilitude of his ensemble scenes; he was also heavily influenced by the ballet adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* mounted by John Cranko in Venice for the company of La Scala in 1958 and subsequently revised in 1962 for the Stuttgart Ballet. A former colleague and friend of MacMillan's, Cranko created the roles of the three harlots presumably as a means of enlivening the ballet's several crowd scenes. MacMillan's adoption of the harlot figures may seem derivative and indeed threaten to derail this chapter's discussion of MacMillan's creative autonomy but it is important to recognize the iterative nature of ballet. Not unlike Shakespeare himself, choreographers build openly upon the work of others. Cranko, and before him Lavrovsky, became important reference points for MacMillan—perhaps more important than Shakespeare, especially when one considers the early modern dramatist's own borrowings from Arthur Brooke's 1562 *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet,* itself an English translation of a French translation of an Italian novella.[11] Lavrovksy himself looked towards full-length and non-Shakespearean classical ballet for inspiration. His townswomen are distinctly Spanish in terms of their balletic style—with hands on hips, heeled stamps, arched backs, steps with deep lunges and tambourines played above their heads. In this, they perform stock choreography from the character dances of classical ballets such as Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov's *The Nutcracker* (1892), which includes a Spanish dance amongst its other national dances. Although the Spanish influence recedes in the subsequent adaptations of Cranko and MacMillan, the use of character dance remains. The three harlots, like the rest of Verona's townswomen, wear heeled pumps rather than pointe shoes. The folk dance

steps they perform indicate the influence of classical ballet tradition on Cranko and MacMillan. In this, ballet history is shown to be just as important as literary history.

MacMillan's employment of Cranko's three harlots points also to their usefulness. In practical terms, the harlots provide roles for three of a ballet company's soloists. Cranko and MacMillan both realize the character of Rosaline for the same reason.[12] The number of female characters that appear in Shakespeare's play is not sufficient for a full-length ballet intent on adequately utilising a company's dancers. The harlots also have a dramatic function. For Jann Parry, MacMillan followed Cranko in "resorting to three hard-working harlots to animate the crowd scenes in the piazza."[13] Certainly, the harlots invigorate the long ensemble sequences in Prokofiev's score. Although Romeo is prominent in these scenes—reflecting the play's treatment of the family feud as played out on the streets of Verona—Juliet is absent and the composer appears to favour the public expression of tension in the play over the domestic anxiety of the Capulet household. These extended street scenes necessitate a great deal of work from the choreographer. The three harlots are useful in this regard. But they do more, I would argue, than simply animate the scenes in which they appear. And, although MacMillan borrows these figures from Cranko's earlier ballet, he does not leave them unchanged. While the harlots in the Cranko's version interact with Romeo, Mercutio and Benvolio, the choreographer does not fully exploit the opportunities for pairing the three prostitutes with the three friends. In MacMillan's adaptation, it is clear to the audience that Romeo, Mercutio, and Benvolio each have a favored harlot and vice versa. This not only creates opportunities for duets but it also allows for the development of meaningful relationships between the male and female characters. The harlots actively and dispassionately seek business from the townsmen, but they have what seem to be companionate relations with Romeo and his friends.

The choreographer is not overly sentimental, however. While Cranko initially dilutes the true nature of the harlots' trade by presenting them as busy hostesses—providing alcohol to the townsmen—MacMillan identifies the women immediately as prostitutes. They enter the first street scene slowly, posing lazily with legs splayed open, attracting the attention of the men (including Romeo and friends) and the ire of the townswomen. The more detailed characterisation of MacMillan's harlots, in contrast to Cranko's characters, does not just contribute to the ballet's naturalistic effects. The harlots perform an important narrative function. In representing Verona's townswomen as petty and jealous—openly attacking the three harlots— MacMillan demonstrates his distaste for respectable femininity. In spite of the commercial imperative of their work, the harlots are seen to care for Romeo, Mercutio, and Benvolio. This is established by the harlots' physically intimate but often non-sexualised interaction with the three men. When Tybalt enters to treat one of the harlots roughly, it becomes clear that the ballet favors the Montagues over the Capulets—an allegiance the play does not necessarily support in its depiction of "[t]wo households, both alike in dignity" (Prologue, 1). The harlots guide the audience in this allegiance and also direct spectators' attention to any action of significance. They are themselves, as outsiders and figures absent from the original source, engaged spectators of the ballet's main plot; their total absorption in the action enables them to act as proxies for the audience. In the fight scene between Mercutio and Tybalt, the three harlots can be clearly seen to lead the townspeople across the stage behind the figures of the two men in a choreographed shadowing of the swordfight. Their support for Mercutio also consolidates our sympathy for the character. MacMillan is here using non-Shakespearean characters in narrative roles. His preference for the Montagues over the Capulets could be said to simplify the plot for its audience—dividing the two parties into (roughly speaking) good and evil—but the mistreatment

of the harlots by the Capulet family, in tandem with Juliet's forced marriage, suggests that MacMillan has something more interesting to say about gender relations in Shakespeare's Verona. Shakespeare's play may not condemn the Capulets explicitly for their behaviour towards women, but MacMillan's ballet does.

SEXUALITY AND THE BALLET

It seems clear that MacMillan's additions to the world of the play reflect agendas beyond Shakespeare. These include the needs of the company, balletic tradition, theatrical fashion of the 1960s and burgeoning gender politics. But, while the harlots may have no equivalents within the text, they do reflect its concerns and conventions. The play's sexual discourse is one area in which these figures embody Shakespeare's ideas, if not his characters. Mercutio's bawdy rhetoric finds a home in the harlots; witness his response to Romeo's melancholy appearance and his commentary on Romeo's poetic love for Rosaline:

> Now is he for the numbers that Petrarch flowed in. Laura to his lady was a kitchen wench – marry, she had a better love to berhyme her – Dido a dowdy, Cleopatra a gypsy, Helen and Hero hildings and harlots, Thisbe a grey eye or so, but not to the purpose. (2.3.36–41)

Compared to Rosaline, the great women of myth and history are—for Romeo—mere sluts. The two sexually derogatory terms used by Mercutio to describe Helen (of Troy) and Hero (of Sestos)—"hildings" and "harlots"—were words that in this period became more closely associated with women. They had historically been used to denote vagabonds or other worthless individuals—not necessarily promiscuous—of either gender.[14] This etymological shift, from

approximately the fifteenth century onwards, towards a focus on female sexual behaviour and its association with criminality is perhaps significant. Shakespeare uses the two terms in reference to both men and women—Leontes labels Polixenes the "harlot King" (2.3.4) in *The Winter's Tale*—but the occurrences of female hildings and harlots outnumber the male within his oeuvre. Certainly *Romeo and Juliet*, often via Mercutio's explicit allusions to prostitution but also in male reactions to Juliet's waywardness, seems concerned more by feminine immorality than male.

MacMillan's ballet would seem to reinforce this pronounced focus on women's sexual depravity and social rebellion. It even appears to match the play's simultaneous criticism and enjoyment of female sexuality. If the language of immoral behaviour was becoming less nuanced and more pointed in Shakespeare's lifetime, the appearance of MacMillan's harlots since the 1960s has also become more obvious. The original costume designs for the harlots by Nicholas Georgiadis identify the characters as divergent from the norm. They wear brighter colours than the muted townswomen—the lead harlot, partnered with Romeo, wears gold while the others sport a light pink and a deeper pink. The designs also utilise bold geometric pattern, with black wool appliqued onto white silk, enabling the harlots to stand out from the crowd. Most interestingly, the neckline of each dress—made with gauze—displays precious gems and coins. Despite the affectionate relations they have with Romeo and friends, the harlots are commercial creatures; they wear the profits of their trade. Hair is always a firm signifier of character in ballet tradition and, unlike the townswomen with their locks neatly tied back and covered, the harlots wear theirs loose. Immediately identifiable as these harlots are, the characters' costumes have, since the original production, been revised to further stress their involvement in prostitution. Georgiadis redesigned the production twice. The Royal Ballet's current production sees the

harlots in plusher, velvet-effect and deeply coloured costumes. The wigs they wear are curlier and fuller, their makeup gaudy. The harlots have become clichés. As dance critic Luke Jennings remarks, "There's a long-standing tradition in ballet that all prostitutes have frizzy hair, love their work and kiss on the mouth."[15] One of the Royal Ballet's more recent story-ballets, Liam Scarlett's 2016 *Frankenstein*, also incorporates this type of prostitute, as Victor and his fellow medical students cavort in a tavern with women of the night. The scene has no equivalent in Mary Shelley's novel and Roslyn Sulcas, reviewing the work for *The New York Times*, was exasperated enough to write "There are prostitutes in curly-hair wigs, enthusiastically lifting their skirts. (Just once, oh league of choreographers, could a ballet prostitute have sleek hair and look bored on the job?)"[16]

Dancer and choreographer Alicia Alonso's 2003 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* for the National Ballet of Cuba, *Shakespeare y sus mascaras, o Romeo y Julieta (Shakespeare and his Masks)*, appears to address the reductive representation of prostitutes within ballet history. Shakespeare himself becomes a character in Alonso's version, selling masks of various sorts to the Veronese townspeople. The opening market scene is similar to Kenneth MacMillan's and also includes prostitute figures. But there is a significant difference in their representation. Donna Woodford describes the scene:

> Shakespeare sold masks, and all around him vendors sold flowers, bread, and cloth. Acrobats performed, and Romeo, Benvolio, and Mercucio moved about the crowd, interacting with the others, until Teobaldo (Tybalt) entered, accompanied by another Capuleto and a prostitute, who, caught in a skirmish between the men, was inadvertently killed. Her sudden death at the end of such a festive scene reintroduced the ideas of violence and tragedy into the play, demonstrated that the feud between the two families

has affected all levels of society, and foreshadowed the many deaths that would follow.

She was carried offstage and covered with Shakespeare's cloak, the mask of tragedy still

lying beside her.17

In Alonso's imagination, Verona's prostitutes are vulnerable, disposable women. Woodford is

certainly right to say that Alonso's harlot represents the ballet's generic identity; the character of

Shakespeare had earlier sold the mask of tragedy to this ill-fated prostitute. But I would suggest

that, in this rare adaptation of the play by a female choreographer, the harlot's role is not purely

allegorical. She also represents, in some sense, the reality of her profession and reflects the

clichéd portrayal of prostitution within many ballet works.

The harlots created by Cranko in the 1960s, and consolidated by MacMillan, became the

template for ballet courtesans thereafter. Subsequent adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*—Derek

Deane for English National Ballet, Ben Stevenson for Houston Ballet, Alexei Ratmansky for the

National Ballet of Canada—retained these additions to a greater or lesser degree and helped give

rise to the kind of affectionate ridicule we hear from Luke Jennings and Roslyn Sulcas and the

type of critical revisions we see from Alicia Alonso. But Cranko and MacMillan were

themselves responding a much older tradition of prostitution within ballet—one in which the

dancers did not perform as courtesans but were in fact courtesans themselves. In the nineteenth

century, prominent ballet companies in France and Russia encouraged the patronage of female

dancers by male theatregoers. MacMillan himself makes reference to this tradition in his 1971

three-act version of *Anastasia*, the story of Anna Anderson's claim to be the only survivor of the

massacre of the Russian royal family in 1918. The second act contains a virtuoso dance for the

character of Mathilde Kchessinska, the real-life Russian ballerina who was also the mistress of

Tsar Nicholas II. Judith Lynne Hanna describes how, in France, "female dancers on the public

stage were thought to be part of the demimonde or echelons of prostitution."[18] How widespread

these activities were is unclear but all dancers were subject to such rumours. Their close

association with prostitution was partly based on their professional status; like prostitutes, they

were working women in societies in which women did not typically work. Literary scholar

Molly Engelhardt discusses these dancers' "real-life mobility in and between the ranks of

debutantes and prostitutes, aristocrats and dressmakers"[19] but it is clear also that dancers and

prostitutes are aligned by virtue of their bodily exposure. As Felicia McCarren confirms in her

1998 *Dance Pathologies*:

> [I]f one specific element of the dance reinforces the ballet's close theoretical association
>
> with prostitution – here I am speaking not of the dancer but of the art of ballet itself – it
>
> would be its public visibility.[20]

For McCarren, ballet as a medium—rather than individual dancers—is implicated in a wider

culture of prostitution predicated on spectacle and the gaze.

The penury that required dancers in the nineteenth century to court patrons and fall into

prostitution has subsided but the sheer number of prostitute roles within ballets performed today

ensures that female dancers are more than familiar with theatrical harlotry. Former Royal Ballet

principal dancer Deborah Bull comments on her own career:

> Aside from an apparently unavoidable tendency to be cast as the second female lead, I
>
> had another recurring theme throughout my dancing career: being cast as the whore. If
>
> there was a lady of the night, a tart, a harlot or a prostitute to be played, you can bet I was
>
> up there doing it.[21]

In the hierarchy of principal dancers at the Royal Ballet in the 1990s, Bull would have given way

to ballerinas such as Darcey Bussell and Viviana Durante. She may not see a connection between

her position as second lead in the Royal Ballet and her expertise in prostitute roles but I would suggest that the kind of breathless virtuosity and brazen visibility that characterize harlot parts force dancers into playing another role, that of ambitious ballerina. The social climbing of MacMillan's three harlots—they reject the ordinary townsmen for sons of the town's aristocracy—is made to reflect the dancers' own aspirations. The visibility inherent in prostitution, as outlined by McCarren, is the lifeblood of these ballet dancers; they need to be seen and seen often to advance within the company. Two of MacMillan's original harlots, Monica Mason and Deanne Bergsma, were promoted to principal in the years following their soloist work in *Romeo and Juliet.* Shakespearean Marjorie Garber, in researching ballet adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, was surprised by the extent to which internal politics within ballet companies affects dance's ability to represent literary works:

> It might be imagined that one way of "universalizing" the love story in the play would have been through its translation into ballet, since without the specificity of words, and with the presumptive requirement that the dancers be young, lithe, and visually beautiful, the particulars of the plot would almost directly yield to the embodied ideology of young love. But, as it turns out, the ballet versions of *Romeo and Juliet* were often star vehicles, and the performers, at least at the beginning, far from young, at least in dance-world terms.[22]

Garber is clearly referring here to Margot Fonteyn's assumption of the role of Juliet in Kenneth MacMillan's adaptation at the age of 45. Fonteyn danced alongside Rudolf Nureyev in the ballet's first performances, despite MacMillan creating the roles of the lovers on the 25-year old Lynn Seymour and her regular partner, Christopher Gable. Fonteyn had, you could argue, earned the right to play Juliet as first lead. Age-appropriate casting in the London theatres was still

overruled by experience in many cases; Peggy Ashcroft, for example, played Katharina in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1960 *The Taming of the Shrew* at the age of 52, opposite a young Peter O'Toole. Garber's image of a *Romeo and Juliet* essentialized by ballet may underestimate dance's capacity for complex ideas but she is correct to suggest that company hierarchy often dictated the balletic vision. In this context, the spectacle of the organisation's aspiring dancers portraying prostitutes raises serious questions about ballet's gender politics.

If we accept that the sheer number of prostitute roles within ballet is problematic, we may be forced to lay much of the blame at the door of Kenneth MacMillan. *Romeo and Juliet*'s harlots are not isolated examples within his works. In addition to *Anastasia*'s portrayal of Tsar Nicholas's ballerina mistress Mathilde Kchessinska, MacMillan's 1974 *Manon* contains multiple prostitute roles—as well as the title role of courtesan Manon Lescaut from the Abbé Prévost's 1731 novel—and his 1978 *Mayerling* stages a tavern scene in which Crown Prince Rudolf drinks and dances with his mistress, Mitzi Caspar, and her fellow whores. In fact, the majority of MacMillan's full-length ballets contain prostitute roles. And yet, even the earliest of these— *Romeo and Juliet*—shows signs of progressive thinking with regard to prostitution and the female dancer. The harlots, despite their dependence on men for money, form a close unit. The paired dancing they perform with Romeo, Mercutio, and Benvolio has a patent equality to it— with mirrored steps. The harlots can even be said to lead these duets on occasion; instead of the traditional pas de deux in which the male dancer positions the ballerina to her best advantage, MacMillan allows the harlots to take on the male role. They frequently support the male dancer as he performs various steps. The harlots also display a refreshingly irreverent attitude towards classical ballet, often falling out of balletic poses mid-step into more natural movement. MacMillan only breaks up the trio in their final scene; when Mercutio dies, his favoured harlot

leaves the stage in grief, never to return. These choreographic decisions—coupled with the prominence that Juliet has within the ballet and the contribution that Lynn Seymour made to the work—suggest that MacMillan's attachment to the harlot figure within his ballets is not based on any desire to objectify the female form. The redesign of the harlots' costumes and the regular revivals of the work at the Royal Ballet since 1965 may have served to diminish the characters, rendering them more grotesque and more comical than they were in the original staging. The three harlots may also be far from a realistic portrayal of prostitution on MacMillan's part but he was demonstrably interested in female sexuality throughout his career. His decision to co-opt the three harlots from Cranko's adaptation was not only based on their usefulness as characters capable of animating the ballet's street scenes. MacMillan utilises the figures as narrative devices, as metatheatrical symbols of ballet's chequered history and as representatives of his own social concerns.

MacMillan's final ballet before his death, *The Judas Tree* (1992), encapsulated these concerns. The work is an allegory of the biblical account of betrayal of Jesus by Judas—set in contemporary London at the construction of Canary Wharf Tower—and it presents that betrayal as the effect of jealousy. A veiled female figure appears amongst the construction workers. Unveiled, she dancers and provokes the men, her style not dissimilar to that of harlot figures throughout MacMillan's career. But this is in no way a comedic representation. The woman's preference for the Jesus figure over Judas (the Foreman) leads to her gang rape and murder, the lynching of Jesus, and the eventual suicide of Judas. At the end of the work, the dancer representing 'Mary' returns to the stage, once again shrouded. Inhabiting the ambiguous space between the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, the work's lone female character seems to represent all women. As Clement Crisp puts it, she embodies "the multiple and unchanging

identities of womankind as mother, beloved, available flesh and consoling virgin".23 The website of the MacMillan Estate also points to the woman's multiform existence:

> The woman cannot be defiled, broken or killed. She is not a person but an unquenchable force: the soul, the Madonna, perhaps the female side of themselves that men deny at their peril. She alone remains at the end as a witness of their fallibility.24

Although these numerous identities are founded rather narrowly on women's relationships with men, the concept of the female as witness to male aggression is one that MacMillan returns to again and again.25 In his *Romeo and Juliet*, the harlots' roles as engaged spectators of the city's "ancient grudge" (Prologue, 3) form one of these examples and MacMillan's request to the audience that they identify with whores is a courageous move. He joins the small number of choreographers who, to borrow the words of Alan Brissenden, "use Shakespeare as a springboard for ideas rather than simply as a source for a story."26

CHALLENGING PETRARCHISM

It seems clear that MacMillan uses the figures of the three harlots as vehicles for his own creative agenda. But, as Mercutio's reference to "hildings and harlots" (2.3.39) suggests, they are not entirely absence from Shakespeare's text even if they do not appear in the dramatis personae. The play's Petrarchan elements—aspects of the work that respond formally and discursively to the Italian Renaissance poet and his prodigious influence on English literary aesthetics—provide us with an opportunity to set the imagined harlots against *Romeo and Juliet*'s dominant mode. This is a Petrarchan mode, adhering to the sonnet form and—by association—poetic cliché. It is a mode in which, to quote Shakespearean Ralph Berry, the characters "speak in quotation".27 It is

also a mode that would seem entirely oppositional to harlotry. For some Shakespeare specialists, the play's Petrarchism renders it apposite for translation into dance. In *Shakespeare's Early Tragedies*, Nicholas Brooke identifies a useful overlap between the artificiality of Shakespeare's play and the formality of classical dance. In discussing what he sees as the lack of emotional commitment on the part of the writer to a play like *Titus Andronicus*, often cited as a piece of cold and overly formalised writing, he says:

> This is even more true of *Romeo*, which in many ways seems to be a formal exercise in romantic tragedy, given the kind of overt formality of structure and verse which rather suggests the order of a stately dance; it is not perhaps surprising that this quality in Shakespeare's play has encouraged the production of a number of ballets in the past hundred years – it is probably, in fact, more often seen on the stage nowadays as a ballet than as a play.[28]

Writing in 1968, Brooke's comment that the ballet may have overtaken the play in popularity can be directly attributed—I would suggest—to the success of MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet.* But Brooke's belief that dance can only represent the play's "formal patterning"[29] suggests that he never saw the ballet himself. Dance can certainly be stately and Prokofiev's well-known "Dance of the Knights" for the Capulet ball attests—with its marching beat and formal, walking dance— to this stateliness. But it is only one mode available to the composer and choreographer. For dance critic Alastair Macaulay, the score may capture one aspect of the play's formality— Brooke's "stately dance"—but it overlooks another element, namely the text's self-conscious literary complexity: "Prokofiev seriously misinterprets Shakespeare's characters – the prime characteristic of the play's hero and heroine is their highly educated cleverness, their love of poetic intricacy and paradox".[30] This may be true—Prokofiev's musical lovers do feel anodyne

compared to their literary counterparts—but the concentration of both literary and dance critics on the play's elevated, formal features at the expense of its prosaic parts does the text and its adaptations no justice. *Romeo and Juliet* has a vulgar underbelly. MacMillan's three harlots represent it.

 Romeo and Juliet is, in fact, neatly balanced between Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan sentiment. Ralph Berry helpfully expresses *Romeo and Juliet*'s seamier side:

> The gravest critical error concerning *Romeo and Juliet* is to assume that the play, more or less, identifies itself with the lovers; and the violence of Mercutio's commentary is on record to remind us of the counterforce whereby the ultimate poise is achieved.31

The harlots, associated with the discourse of Mercutio more than any other character, join him in what Berry terms the anti-Petrarchan "resistance movement".32 They also echo Mercutio's use of prose, in stark contrast to the balletic equivalent of poetry—pointe work and pas de deux. The harlots, with their relative freedom of expression and movement, promote an easy physicality. By the end of the play, and the ballet, even the young lovers wish to exit the world of poetic cliché and embrace the kind of somatic practice that the harlots embody. Shakespearean Judith Haber plots the play's "clear progression from the verbal to the physical" and describes how "[w]hile those around them ramble on endlessly, the young lovers attempt to exit from words into action".33 The ballet too—although it exists almost entirely in the realm of the physical—charts a movement from formal dance to more primal movement. When Romeo discovers the apparently dead body of Juliet in the Capulet tomb, he dances with her prone body in what many see as a disturbing pas de deux. It is worth noting that Prokofiev's decision to give his first iteration of the ballet a happy ending, in which Romeo and Juliet are reunited, was based partly on distaste at the prospect of such a macabre duet: "The reasons which forced us to this

barbarism were purely choreographic; the living people can dance, the dying won't dance lying down".34 Prokofiev later reverted to Shakespeare's tragic ending. Tasked with choreographing such a spectacle, MacMillan contorts the vocabulary of classical ballet. Although the ballerina remains brazenly on pointe, she repeatedly falls to the floor, unable the defy gravity in the fashion that ballet dancers are best known for. MacMillan's decision to depart from traditional balletic form at the end of the work can be contrasted with Shakespeare's more conventional closure to the play. In the source-text, redemption takes the form of reconciliation, as the Capulet and Montague families agree to end their feud and memorialize the lovers in golden statuary. MacMillan exacerbates the work's tragic reality by omitting this scene from the ballet adaptation. Leonid Lavrovsky's choreography for the original staging of Prokofiev's score retained the reconciliation and shows Juliet draped upon Romeo but, in MacMillan's version, the curtains fall on the dead bodies of the lovers, reaching towards one another but not quite touching. For Christopher Gable, on whom MacMillan created the role of Romeo, the message of the story is clear, and bleak: "So they die apart, not touching. Two beautiful young lives have been totally wasted. Nothing's been achieved, nothing's better, and they're not united. They're just dead. Just two dead things."35 Although the dance work departs from the finale of Shakespeare's play, it still mirrors the move from the abstract to the all too real within the drama. As literary critic Gayle Whittier comments, "the inherited Petrarchan word becomes English flesh by declining from lyric freedom to tragic fact".36

Romeo and Juliet, to quote Judith Haber, "escape love by the Petrarchan book not by denying it, but by literalizing it".37 They pay for their defiance with death, as does Mercutio. But this realization of poetic conceits need not be morbid. Rosalie Colie takes pleasure from Shakespeare's sense of literary play:

Romeo and Juliet makes some marvelous technical manipulations. One of the most pleasurable, for me, of Shakespeare's many talents is his 'unmetaphoring' of literary devices, his sinking of the conventions back into what, he somehow persuades us, is 'reality', his trick of making a verbal convention part of the scene, the action, or the psychology of the play itself.38

Shakespeare uses stagecraft to realize abstract ideas, ideas that typically exist in two dimensions on the printed page. Dance, in its physicality and freedom from language, takes this process one stage further and the three harlots—in addition to their other functions—represent ballet's ability to extend and elaborate on the literary text.

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NOTES

[1] William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd
ed., ed. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 2005), 1.4.13. All subsequent quotations from Shakespeare's works are from
this edition unless otherwise specified.

[2] Arlene Croce, "Royal jitters," in *Writing in the Dark, Dancing in "The New Yorker"* (New
York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982).

3 Jann Parry, *Different Drummer: The Life of Kenneth MacMillan* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 292–3.

4 Naomi Conn Liebler, "The Critical Backstory," in *Romeo and Juliet: A Critical Reader*, ed. Julia Reinhard Lupton (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 21.

5 Clive Barnes, Edward Downes, Karoly Kope, and Siegmund Levarie, "Shakespeare in Opera and Ballet," in *Staging Shakespeare: Seminars on Production Problems*, ed. Glenn Loney (New York: Garland, 1990), 215.

6 John Higgins, interview with Kenneth MacMillan, *The Times*, May 17, 1978.

7 For further discussion of the complex relations between text, music and movement within dance adaptations of literary works, see Lynsey McCulloch, "Shakespeare and Dance," *Literature Compass* 13, no. 2 (2016): 75.

8 Julie Sanders, *Shakespeare and Music: Afterlives and Borrowings* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 68.

9 Brandon Shaw, "Effacing Rebellion and Righting the Slanted: Declassifying the Archive of MacMillan's (1965) and Shakespeare's (1597) *Romeo and Juliet*s," *Dance Research Journal* 49, no. 2 (2017): 65.

10 Parry, *Different Drummer*, 281. Parry also remarks upon MacMillan's use of extras to create further colour and life in these carnivalesque scenes.

11 For a full discussion of Shakespeare's sources, see Jill Levenson's introduction to her 2000 Oxford edition of the play. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Jill L. Levenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2–15.

12 I am grateful to one of this volume's anonymous readers for the suggestion that Rosaline's bodily presence within ballet versions of the play is also based on dance's difficulty in conveying reported characters.

13 Parry, *Different Drummer*, 281.

14 *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed November 1, 2016, http://www.oed.com.

15 Luke Jennings, "Romeo and Juliet review – teenage kicks from Rojo and Acosta," *The Observer*, June 14, 2014, accessed November 1, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jun/15/romeo-and-juliet-rojo-acosta-review-royal-albert-hall.

16 Roslyn Sulcas, "Review: 'Frankenstein,' at Royal Ballet, Complete With Dissection," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2016, accessed November 1, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/09/arts/dance/review-frankenstein-at-royal-ballet-complete-with-dissection.html.

17 Donna C. Woodford, "*Shakespeare Y Sus Mascaras, o Romeo Y Julieta* (review)," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 114. See also Donna Woodford-Gormley, "In Fair Havana, Where We Lay Our Scene: *Romeo and Juliet* in Cuba," in *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage*, ed. Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 201–212.

18 Judith Lynne Hanna, *Dance, Sex, and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 124.

19 Molly Engelhardt, *Dancing out of Line: Ballrooms, Ballets, and Mobility in Victorian Fiction and Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 21.

20 Felicia McCarren, *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 76–77.

21 Deborah Bull and Luke Jennings, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Ballet* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

22 Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), 44.

23 Clement Crisp, "Into the Labyrinth: Kenneth MacMillan and his Ballets," *Dance Research* 25, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 194.

24 The MacMillan Estate, "The Judas Tree," Kenneth MacMillan: Choreographer, accessed November 1, 2016, http://www.kennethmacmillan.com/ballets/all-works/1977-1992/the-judas-tree.html.

25 For dance critic Luke Jennings, reviewing the Royal Ballet's 2017 revival of *The Judas Tree*, the work's sexual violence, as allegory, is problematic: "to present misogyny and gang-rape on stage and then explain it away as symbolic, as metaphysical rather than physical, is disingenuous. *The Judas Tree* makes voyeurs of us all." While I recognise the work's capacity for misogyny and the discomfort it might produce in the spectator, Jennings may here underestimate the physicality of the ballet in performance and its ability to challenge MacMillan's own *meta*physical underpinning of it. See "The Judas Tree review – genius marred by misogyny," *The Observer*, October 29, 2017, accessed December 19, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/oct/29/the-judas-tree-kenneth-macmillan-royal-ballet-observer-review.

26 Alan Brissenden, "Dancing Shakespeare in Australia," *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance* 8, no. 23 (2011): 69.

27 Ralph Berry, *The Shakespearean Metaphor: Studies in Language and Form* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1978), 40.

28 Nicholas Brooke, *Shakespeare's Early Tragedies* (1968; repr., Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 81.

29 Brooke, *Shakespeare's Early Tragedies*, 87.

30 Alastair Macaulay, "A Peace on Both Your Houses: Lovers Alive and Well," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2008, accessed November 1, 2016,

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/07/arts/dance/07rome.html.

31 Berry, *The Shakespearean Metaphor*, 42.

32 Berry, *The Shakespearean Metaphor*, 40. One of the anonymous readers to this volume also pointed out the harlots' kinship with the Capulet servants, Sampson and Gregory, and the possibility that the harlots, to some extent, replace these figures in the translation from play to ballet. Not only do Sampson and Gregory deal in bawdy puns, reflecting the harlots' earthy sexuality, but they also draw our attention to the play's interest in movement, specifically antithetical images of static motion: 'A dog of that house shall move me to stand' (1.1.10). See Lynsey McCulloch, "'Here's that shall make you dance': Movement and Meaning in Bern: Ballett's *Julia und Romeo*," in *Reinventing the Renaissance: Shakespeare and his Contemporaries in Adaptation and Performance*, ed. Sarah Annes Brown, Robert I. Lublin and Lynsey McCulloch (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 255–268.

33 Judith Haber, *Desire and Dramatic Form in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 52.

34 Quoted in Nelly Kravetz, "Prokofiev and Sherman: The first Soviet production of *Romeo and Juliet*," *Three Oranges Journal* 8 (2004): 18.

35 Quoted in Parry, *Different Drummer*, 283.

36 Gaye Whittier, "The Sonnet's Body and the Body Sonnetized in *Romeo and Juliet*,"

Shakespeare Quarterly 40, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 27.

37 Haber, *Desire and Dramatic Form*, 52–3.

38 Rosalie Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 145.