

Rachel and Juliet, written and performed by
Lynn Redgrave. Folger Theatre, April 11, 2009.

Sarah Johnson, McMaster University

Abstract

Lynn Redgrave's one-woman play *Rachel and Juliet* smudges the lines between Shakespeare's scenes and scenes of her mother's life in an affectionate tribute to Rachel Kempson. With emphasis on Juliet, her mother's favorite role, Redgrave juxtaposes and blends Shakespeare's words with Rachel's and layers performances so that at times the audience cannot be sure of whether Redgrave is speaking, or Rachel, or Juliet, or Rachel as Juliet. The effect of such layering is to interrogate the relationships among these multiple "texts": how does one "text" illuminate, or define, restrict, exert pressure on, validate, or perhaps fail, the other?

"Let me tell you about my mother," Lynn Redgrave begins, settling comfortably into a lone chair at almost center stage, a table at her elbow holding books and a cup of tea completing the list of props. Immediately, Redgrave establishes an intimacy with her audience, positioning us as if we were seated on a sofa opposite her chair, as if we were there for a cozy evening visit. The intimacy only increases as Redgrave draws on personal reminiscences and emotions not simply to "tell" us about her mother, Rachel Kempson, but also to perform her mother, and, adding an extra level of insight, to perform her mother performing Juliet, the role that marked the beginning of Rachel Kempson's acting career in 1932 at Stratford-on-Avon. The title of Redgrave's one-woman play both alludes to and displaces "Romeo," appropriately signaling that this is a play as much about relationships between women and about Kempson's love for the role of Juliet as it is about her lifelong "search for her own Romeo."¹ The title also announces, along with a mention early in the play of a family dog named "Viola" and a house referred to as "Illyria," how Shakespeare's lines will gain fresh layers of significance as Redgrave pulls them into the context of her own memories, using Shakespeare as one of her tools to reflect upon and illuminate poignant moments of struggle and of strength in her mother's life.

In one of the play's first appropriations of Shakespeare, Redgrave, having evoked for us a strong image of the monument at her mother's grave, turns the sonnets' familiar warning to

reproduce copies of one's beauty before it is too late into a playful celebration of Kempson as a mother who has left her mark on the "prints" of the children she left behind — Vanessa, Lynn, and Corin Redgrave. As she describes how carved figures of children linking hands encircle the monument, Redgrave enacts this image by positioning herself as those children. Arms outstretched as if hugging an imagined central pillar and as if holding hands with her two siblings, first on one side of the monument, then another, and swaying as if in the breeze, she effectively constructs herself and her play as moving, living monuments to a woman who was far from an alabaster lady. When Redgrave follows this image by slipping into another voice, calling, "Mistress! What, mistress! Juliet! . . . / Why, lamb, why, lady! Fie you slugabed!" and "I needs must wake her" (4.5.1, 2, 9),² the well known lines of Juliet's nurse as she attempts to awaken the drugged Juliet equally seem to convey Redgrave's effort to awaken the spirit of her mother, invoking her as the muse of the performance.

An overlapping or merging of roles to invest Shakespeare's lines with alternate meanings as they refer to Juliet, to Rachel, and to Rachel as Juliet, is a defining feature of the play. In one sense, this layering of meanings and roles is itself very Shakespearean. Aware of Rosalind's disguise and of her feelings for Orlando in *As You Like It*, as the audience we enjoy a level of significance in the exchanges between Rosalind and Orlando to which Orlando himself is ignorant, just as in *Twelfth Night* we perceive extra shades of meaning in the disguised Viola's words that are lost upon her interlocutor, Orsino. The element of self-protective disguise and role-playing that at the same time facilitates the expression of private feelings is also present in *Rachel and Juliet*. Redgrave tells us how her mother, the most romantic person she ever knew, fell in love instantly with Michael Redgrave (she played opposite him in *Flowers of the Forest* in 1935) and found it difficult to recite her lines as Juliet with him because they felt "so real" that she was afraid Michael would see the truth in her eyes. Here, Redgrave takes on Kempson's voice delivering Juliet's speech to Romeo, in which Juliet claims that without the cover of darkness "a maiden blush" would "bepaint" her cheek "for that which thou hast heard me speak tonight." In Rachel's (as opposed to Juliet's) mouth, of course, a different kind of overhearing is meant, the overhearing of real feelings in the recital of the oft-heard lines. "Fain would I dwell on form — fain, fain deny / What I have spoke; but farewell compliment! / Dost thou love me?" (2.2.85-87), she continues, winning a laugh from the audience for a playful eagerness, at this point, that is clearly more Rachel's than Juliet's.

The differences between the two roles, as connected by lines from *Romeo and Juliet*, are not always so lighthearted. Although she borrows both technique and lines from Shakespeare, at some of the more serious discrepancies between Shakespeare's text and the "text" of Kempson's

own narrative or life-story, Redgrave probes the limits of Shakespeare as a language her mother absorbed, readily available as a means of interpreting and expressing lived experience. Speeches in Rachel's voice conveying Juliet's joyful anticipation of her rushed marriage do not communicate quite the same feeling in the added context of Rachel's precipitous marriage to Michael when we hear Rachel expressing self-doubt at having pressured Michael to marry despite his protests based on the "difficulties in his nature"; when Redgrave shows us Rachel's confidence wilting from the cold reception she has received from her future mother-in-law; and when she gives voice to Rachel's deflating recognition, upon handling her husband-to-be's wedding clothes in an effort to stir excitement before the ensuing wedding, that "they were just clothes." At her own wedding, Kempson wants to feel the thrill that Juliet as bride expresses poetically, but is left with the recognition that Juliet's words simply do not belong in her own, unpoetic reality, where clothes are just clothes. The invocation of Juliet's excitement points to an absence, a void in Kempson's lived reality, but does little to explore and articulate the contours of that void. Does Shakespeare's text, as Kempson's and Redgrave's natural point of comparison, help to create that void? Here, and at other appropriations of Shakespeare in Redgrave's play, the question arises as to whether Shakespeare's text is exerting pressure on real life or real life is exerting pressure on the meaning and relevance of Shakespeare's lines.

While *Rachel and Juliet* does not definitively resolve such questions of appropriation, it does give precedence to Rachel Kempson's story, which the role of Juliet, and Shakespeare's language more generally, help to illuminate. Later in Rachel's marriage, at a moment when she is hopeful about rekindling some of its passion, she visits Michael while he is working on the film *Mourning Becomes Electra*, only to be introduced to his lover and shown to her own, separate bedroom. Redgrave dramatizes her mother's reaction by reciting, in Rachel's voice, Shakespeare's sonnet 29. The general "when" of "When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, / I all alone beweepe my outcast state" (lines 1-2) gives way to the specific context of Rachel's fresh emotional wound, which infuses these lines with the pain of her rejection. Her intonation of "for thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings, / that then I scorn to change my state with kings" (lines 13-14) transforms the sonnet's celebration of the speaker's beloved into Rachel's defiant expression of self-pride — a satisfaction with her choice to love Michael and with herself despite her present circumstance.

As the transformed sonnet shows, in *Rachel and Juliet* Shakespeare's words are not important in and of themselves; their significance comes from how Rachel actually lived them (or did not live them) and from their positioning in the retelling of *her* story. Rachel and Michael's marriage endured, but Rachel, too, had an affair, with encouragement from Michael, who, as Lynn suggests, felt guilty for the difficulties he brought into the marriage. The bliss and frustration of stolen

moments in Rachel's affair with this second "Romeo," who is also married, find expression in the scene in which Romeo and Juliet delay their parting at the beginning of 3.5 ("Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day. / It was the nightingale, and not the lark" [3.5.1-2]). Redgrave always juxtaposes Shakespeare's lines with Rachel's own words, and in this case, she introduces the topic of the affair by performing a memorable conversation she had with Kempson. She recalls asking her mother how it was she was so beautiful and unwrinkled compared to another woman of her age, to which Rachel replies that that woman was not "cherished," and a woman who is not cherished begins to "shrivel." At first confused by this answer, thinking that her father was not exactly "cherishing" her mother, Redgrave reconstructs for us the illuminating moment in which she witnessed a wave and a look between Rachel and her second "Romeo" in a crowded room, which instantly told her that Rachel was indeed "cherished." This vivid scenario, which Redgrave re-enacts from Kempson's own unique telling of it, neither overshadows the rendition of *Romeo and Juliet's* nightingale scene nor fades before it; rather, it carries equal weight alongside Shakespeare's scene as an account of Kempson's love affair with its joys and restraints. Redgrave does not, in other words, set Shakespeare's words apart from her mother's as especially authoritative or surpassingly insightful. Instead, Shakespeare becomes, along with personal memories and Kempson's own writings, an instrument that Redgrave can use to tell us about her mother.

The intensity of the teenaged Romeo and Juliet's stolen moments become Rachel's reality later in life, and her undiminishing attachment to the role of Juliet connects with this detail. Following an endearing rendition of an aged Kempson performing Juliet at her grand-daughter's wedding, Redgrave reports how such performances taught her that an aging body could not obscure the energy of a youthful spirit. Indeed, Redgrave's convincing and layered performances of a Rachel much younger than herself (66 at the time of performance), of an older Rachel, and of both Rachels performing the young Juliet, effectively demonstrate that point to the audience. By delivering the teenaged Juliet's lines delaying the departure of her young husband in the persona of Rachel as a middle-aged woman addressing her lover, and also by performing Juliet in the persona of an elderly Rachel playfully putting on a show for her granddaughter's wedding guests, Redgrave evokes the youthful passion of Juliet to set off a characteristic that is entirely Rachel's own. Juliet's lines come to highlight much more than the intensity of young love; they convey Rachel's resilient spirit in her emotional capacity for such intense passion even when she is much older, wiser, and more scarred by previous disappointments than the young Juliet.

Rachel's second Romeo eventually shatters the joy of their secret relationship when he continues to insist on its secrecy even after his wife's death. Rachel makes it clear that she "cannot go on with disguised writing," and when her Romeo seems to become cold and withdraws

from their correspondence, she is devastated. Rachel's anguish is clear in Redgrave's delivery (in Rachel's voice) of Juliet's stunned question "Art thou gone so?" (3.5.43), but also in her emotional delivery of lines later revealed to be taken from Kempson's final letters to "Romeo." These letters construct Rachel's capacity to feel deeply and her tendency to be governed by emotions as a strength; Redgrave performs a teary Rachel explaining in one of her letters how telling "Romeo" everything he meant to her and how crushed she feels at his unresponsiveness was a matter of "self-preservation." A tender note of humor elicits a laugh from the audience even in the midst of the letters' despair when Rachel raises the possibility that her aging Romeo might be suffering from severe memory loss, in which case he can escape the guilt he should otherwise feel. Around this time, Rachel's husband was dying of Parkinson's disease. Lynn recalls her mother sinking into depression; she always wore dark glasses and even admitted that she wanted to kill herself. Lynn Redgrave explains to us that she is able to quote directly from her mother's final sorrowful love letters to her second Romeo because after that Romeo's death, his son returned the letters to the family, informing them that his father never had received them. Instead, his sister-in-law had intercepted them. In a terrible parallel to *Romeo and Juliet*, then, just as Friar Laurence's crucial letter never reaches Romeo, these letters miscarry with similarly disastrous results. Redgrave follows the revelation of this discovery by delivering Juliet's famous line — "Parting is such sweet sorrow / That I shall say good night till it be morrow" (2.2.185-86) — which here resonates with the description of Rachel's lingering grief at the loss of her second Romeo.

By interweaving Kempson's words and passages from her letters and book *Life Among the Redgraves* (1986) with passages from Shakespeare, Redgrave not only affirms the poetry and drama of her mother's lines, but also calls attention to the differences between creating or performing a Juliet and actually living, as a woman, experiences much like those of Juliet. Indeed, a kind of mutual validation seems to take place between Shakespeare's and Kempson's texts. The constant juxtaposition and overlapping of Kempson's words with Shakespeare's has the effect of affirming Kempson in a meaningfully creative and artistic role; in Redgrave's eyes, her mother's text belongs beside Shakespeare's. At the same time, Kempson's life-long engagement with the words and feelings of Juliet, her ability to relate to Shakespeare's female character across a range of her own lived experience, has the effect of making Juliet relevant, legitimizing the character as a meaningful representation of a woman. Today, when we are increasingly interrogating crucial differences between male-authored and female-authored texts in early modern representations of women, this is not an unnecessary validation.

Even while this mutual validation between texts takes place, Redgrave gives priority to her mother's experience. The role of Juliet is central in Redgrave's play precisely because it was

a role Rachel fell in love with, a role that helped establish her acting career. Just as "Rachel" shoves "Romeo" out of the play title, the role and lines of Romeo as Shakespeare set them down are not nearly as important as Juliet's in Redgrave's performance. The name "Romeo" is really only a title or placeholder for the man Rachel designates as the person she feels most passionately about, so that two very different men share the title for most of the play. And yet, despite this pressure that real life exerts on Shakespeare's text, "real-life" experience and the performance of Shakespeare are also complexly related and difficult to disentangle. Redgrave cannot cleanly sever Shakespeare's text from the "text" of Kempson's experience because Kempson spent years of her life as a Shakespearean actor. In this light, Shakespeare becomes part of the legacy that mother passes on to daughter, actor passes on to actor. Simultaneously a comfortable performance of Shakespeare and Lynn Redgrave's very real tribute to her mother, *Rachel and Juliet* itself attests to this entanglement.

The structure of Redgrave's play suggests, however, not an actor's full becoming of any one character, but a use of character, a continual putting on and taking off of various roles, as Redgrave does not remain in character as herself, her mother, Juliet, the nurse, or Juliet's mother for very long before slipping into a different role and voice. In this play, the role of Juliet provides a means of self-expression (enabling Rachel to first express her feelings to Michael while "rehearsing," for instance); a means of understanding another (as Redgrave uses her mother's favorite role to reconstruct imaginatively her feelings at important moments in her life); a means of self-perception (which, for Redgrave, could very well be linked to her understanding of Kempson); and a marker of possibility (facilitating an aging woman's expression of a youthful spirit).

Redgrave's final invocations of Shakespeare emphasize her technique of appropriating his roles for her own purposes. She earnestly addresses Sonnet 115 to Kempson, turning the speaker's expression of increasing love for his beloved into a daughter's anxious expression of growing love for her mother even after her death, as she worries about not having expressed the extent of her love enough when Kempson was living. Just after revisiting the scene of her mother's death (in which Guiderius' and Aviragus' song for Imogen when they mistakenly believe her dead in *Cymbeline* becomes a final lullaby for and in honor of Kempson), Redgrave begins the soliloquy that Juliet speaks prior to drugging herself. Juliet's "Farewell! God knows when we shall meet again" (4.3.14) upon the exit of her mother and nurse here comes across as Redgrave's mournful good-bye to Kempson. As Redgrave continues with Juliet's lines, though, she seems to take on, yet again, the role of Rachel playing Juliet. Perhaps moving in the opposite direction, the play's closing speech — in the voice of Kempson/Juliet as she joyfully anticipates seeing Romeo again — comes to sound equally like the voice of a daughter envisioning a reunion with her mother, especially in that, just

prior to this closing speech, Redgrave has brought us back to the site of her mother's grave. She tells us her feeling that Rachel was "here," with "here" seeming to refer at once to the imagined field surrounding the monument and to the stage. Indeed, Lynn Redgrave describes the experience of playing her mother as "meeting my mother,"³ and clearly, Shakespeare's texts are less important in their own right than they are as a flexible means to accommodate that meeting.

Notes

1. From Details: by Lynn Redgrave on The Folger Shakespeare Library website, <http://www.folger.edu/woSummary.cfm?woid=495> [cited 28 April 2009, link currently not active].
2. All quotations from Shakespeare refer to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, fifth edition, edited by David Bevington (2004).
3. "Interview with Lynn Redgrave," on the Folger Shakespeare Library website, <http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=3109> [cited 28 April 2009].

References

- "Interview with Lynn Redgrave." 2009. Folger Shakespeare Library website. Available online: <http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=3109> [cited 28 April 2009].
- Kempson, Rachel. 1986. *Life Among the Redgraves*. First American edition. New York: Dutton.
- Shakespeare, William. 2004. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Edited by David Bevington. Fifth edition. New York: Pearson Longman.