

MERCUTIO AND THE MODERN GENDER IN *ROMEO + JULIET*

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When you first read *Romeo and Juliet*, you probably didn't think "Fair Verona" would include fast cars, neon billboards, and drag queens. However, in Baz Luhrmann's 1996 adaptation of the classic play, the audience experiences a deluge of bright colors, sounds, and gaudy religious iconography. And although Luhrmann changes so much about what we would perceive as fourteenth century Italy, he preserves the machismo of the Montague and Capulet boys, while utilizing unconventional methods of gender expression to shift the focus from common gender stereotypes to a closer study of issues that lie within toxic masculinity itself. I will discuss the ways in which both Shakespeare and Luhrmann address violent maleness, and how Luhrmann's Mercutio responds to the Shakespearean idea of the weak, emotional female. The representation of Mercutio as a drag queen argues that femininity is powerful and emphasizes issues with masculinity that are found in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Shakespeare critiques toxic masculinity in *Romeo and Juliet* by linking tragic events of the play to displays of masculine violence, such as Tybalt and Mercutio's death. By showing the tragic consequences of toxic masculinity, Shakespeare critiques male violence as an expression of gender identity. The play introduces this theme when Sampson says to Gregory, "women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall. Therefore I will

push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall" (1.1.13–16). Sampson is telling Gregory that to prove he is not weak, he will disrespect any Montague man by pushing him into the street, and will rape any Montague woman by pushing her up against a wall—both violent acts, all to assert his dominance and masculinity. The issue with the way these characters express their maleness lies not only within the resulting violence, but also its link to male sexuality, usually expressed through dominance over the "weaker sex." Romeo, a character often mocked for being feminine, eventually surrenders to the toxic masculinity he has avoided through the first two acts of the play when Tybalt kills Mercutio. Romeo says to Juliet, "Thy beauty hath made me effeminate. And in my temper softened valor's steel!" (3.1.75–77). In this case, Romeo equates femininity with weakness and believes that this weakness has caused Mercutio's death; but actually, the true cause of Mercutio's death is his unwillingness to let Tybalt go without a duel. Giving in to the revenge narrative that Tybalt lives by, Romeo murders Tybalt in hopes of casting off his weakness.

Luhrmann refuses to abide by the narrative of male strength being inherently tied to female weakness. Instead, he omits dialogue that degrades women, while still emphasizing Shakespeare's critique of the way the Montague and Capulet boys express their masculinity. Similar to the original play, the opening scene

of Luhrmann's adaptation establishes the theme of masculine violence with gunshots, fast cars, and fire; however, Luhrmann cuts the lines about rape between Sampson and Gregory. Instead, the film focuses more closely on the issues with masculine violence, and less about the degradation of women. I failed to find a single instance in the 1996 adapted script that negatively references femininity, or even mentions traditional gender roles, as Shakespeare does several times in the original *Romeo and Juliet*. Instead of using the gender dichotomy that Shakespeare balances—one in which men are violent and powerful, and women are weak and powerless—Luhrmann lets the destruction and brutality of the male characters speak on its own.

Luhrmann refuses to translate the inferiority of women into his modern version, and instead illustrates moments in which women are oppressed, such as Fulgencio Capulet's abuse toward Juliet, as instances in which men fail to show compassion and humanity. Fulgencio is portrayed as a domestic abuser as he grabs, shakes, and drags Juliet around the set, yelling in her face and pushing off Lady Capulet and The Nurse as they try to prevent his cruelty. Luhrmann displays this behavior as unacceptable through Lady Capulet and The Nurse's physical interventions, and his continuing show of male aggression. Luhrmann cuts misogynist lines from the play so that Fulgencio's abuse does not appear rooted in a sexist, Shakespearean society, but that it unsettles the audience due to the modern backdrop. In this twenty-first century

landscape, the abuse becomes an issue of male dominance.

Luhrmann represents Mercutio as a drag queen to further blur the lines of gender expectations, contrasting with the machismo of the Montague and Capulet boys. One way in which he does this is through the transformation of the original Queen Mab speech. The speech becomes Mercutio's energetic expression of his femininity. In the film, the scene becomes a simultaneous declaration of power and femaleness—instead of saying once "This is she" and being cut off by Romeo as the original text indicates, Mercutio definitively screams (1): "This is she! *This is she!*" (1.4.98). Mercutio is entirely dressed in drag while giving this speech, and ends it in a powerful pose—fists clenched at his sides, face raised to the sky, yelling in passion and anger, ending with a firework to punctuate his declaration.

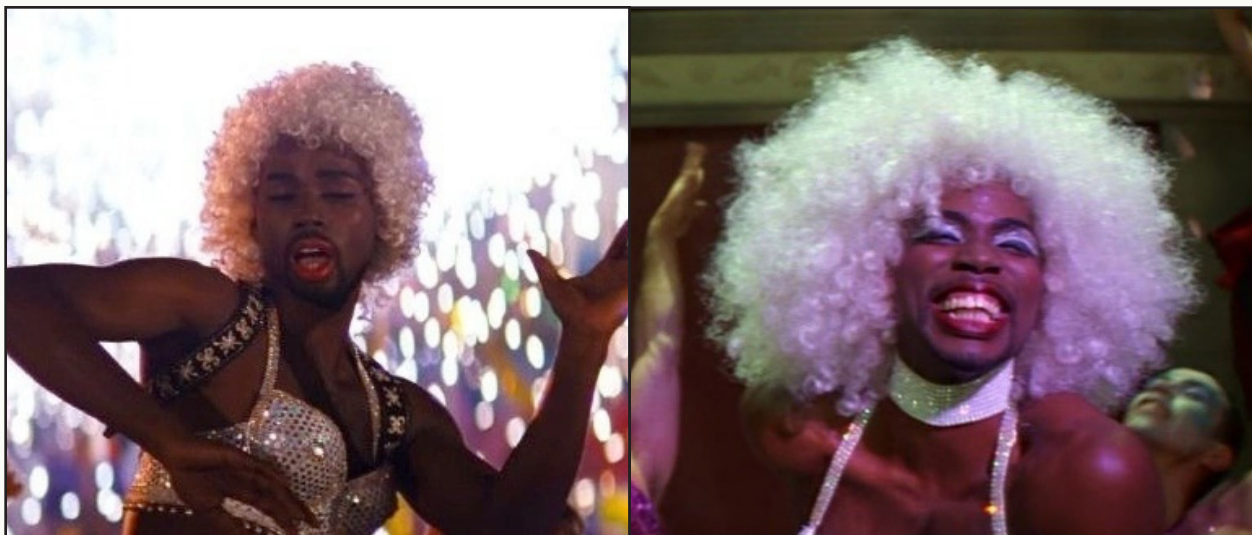


Mercutio delivering the Queen Mab speech.

The context of the Queen Mab speech originated from Mercutio mocking a lovesick Romeo, but in Luhrmann's recreation, Mercutio identifies with Queen Mab, and in a

way, becomes her. Mercutio grows angry, as if Romeo's interest in someone else is personal to Mercutio—as if it hurts him. Mercutio's vulnerability makes him feel confused and out of control, causing him to become empowered by the story of Queen Mab. This fairy called Queen Mab has the power to deliver wild fantasies, "O'er ladies' lips, who straight on kisses dream," as well as punish women with diseases for having naughty thoughts, "Which

by taking something historically negative—femininity—and translating it into something to celebrate and applaud. Baz Luhrmann faced the challenge of translating Elizabethan England, a time period when men owned women as their property, to modern day. The insertion of Mercutio's drag identity transcends gender roles within Luhrmann's modern Verona, instead of adhering to the original, sexist Verona. When interacting with his friends—Romeo dressed



Mercutio, before (left) and during (right) taking the stage in drag.

oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues" (1.4.78–79). Queen Mab's power to control love and sexual desire appeals to Mercutio in this scene, as he feels helpless to prevent Romeo from loving Juliet. Luhrmann draws a clever connection between Queen Mab and drag. Mercutio identifies with powerful female figures, as it allows him to express femininity as a man, while the men that quarrel around him try to ascertain and demonstrate their maleness.

The use of drag in the 1996 adaptation emphasizes the powerfulness of women

as a knight, the other Montagues dressed as Vikings, costumes representative of maleness and fighting—Mercutio wears a small, white wig (2). However, when he appears on stage (3), his wig is suddenly larger, he has a cape, gloves, and choker, and he's wearing makeup. He steps into his stage persona, and in front of a large party, lip syncs to "Young Hearts Run Free." He is not laughed at, ridiculed, or oppressed—he is noticed, celebrated, and free from the masculine constraints that his friends exist within. Through drag, Mercutio's femininity becomes his power.

Mercutio canonically participates in acts of masculine violence; however, Luhrmann adapts these moments to indicate his feminine vulnerability towards Romeo. Luhrmann takes a typically female trait, like affection, and adapts it to become Mercutio's authority. The prop of his gun illustrates this (4). When Romeo leaves his friends to meet with The Nurse on the beach, Mercutio senses that it has something to do with why Romeo has been missing all night. As Romeo speaks with The Nurse, Mercutio energetically shouts Romeo's name, but fails to gain his attention. Once he gains his attention, his face lights up (5)—but when Romeo dismisses him, he appears angry, maybe even hurt (6). He uses his gun, a weapon, as an instrument to gain Romeo's attention.

Shakespeare riddles this play with machismo, as the Montagues and the Capulets fight an impersonal rivalry to prove that they are men. However, Luhrmann rejects a traditional view of gender within the adaptation; he makes *Romeo + Juliet* true to Shakespeare's criticism of toxic masculinity, while omitting the casual misogyny of the original play to appropriately address a modern audience. Furthermore, to see Mercutio represent femaleness, and to make it his power, forces the viewer to acknowledge the strength in femininity, as well as the harm in patriarchal gender roles.



From left to right: Mercutio shoots his gun into the air to gain Romeo's attention. Romeo turns to him. Romeo dismisses him.

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