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Mercutio and Romeo: an Analysis of Male Friendship in the Renaissance

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Honors Thesis

Mercutio and Romeo: An Analysis of Male Friendship in the Renaissance

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Abstract

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1595/96) depicts the forbidden love of two young individuals – Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet. Though many focus on the hardships they endure, a relationship briefly touched on is that of Romeo and his best friend, Mercutio. Mercutio is a very unique character to the play, constantly speaking against Romeo's actions of love and flamboyantly expressing his own opinions on the matter, bringing some scholars to suspect an underlying theme of homoeroticism. However, the tradition of male friendship in the Renaissance, partnered with Gale Edwards' theatrical production, provide the framework for interpreting their relationship to be heteronormative.

Introduction

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1595/96) depicts the famous forbidden love of two young individuals – Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet. Due to its many underlying themes, poetic style, and thematic strategies, this particular play is still taught and performed across the globe. Though many focus on Romeo and Juliet and the hardships they face, a relationship often only briefly touched on is that of Romeo and his best friend, Mercutio. Mercutio is a very unique character to the play, constantly speaking against Romeo's actions of love and flamboyantly expressing his own opinions on the matter. Though the play text only demonstrates this verbally, a visual representation depicts Mercutio to be a constant center of attention. He desires to help Romeo realize that Juliet is not worth throwing his life away. Based on his affections for Romeo paired with his on-stage representation, Mercutio is often assumed to have an underlying homoerotic desire for Romeo. Though I see the grounds for such claims, I am skeptical of this conclusion.

Though many perceive an undertone of homoeroticism between Mercutio and Romeo, the tradition of male friendship in the Renaissance provides the framework for interpreting their relationship to be platonic. These competing interpretations of their friendship can be seen in Gale Edwards' production at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater (2010). Edwards chooses to heighten the sexuality of the production through hand gestures, body language, tone, and costuming. However, this raised level of sexuality does not necessarily imply that Mercutio has hidden affections for Romeo. In fact, many of Mercutio's overly sexual acts do not label him as in love with his best friend, but rather show confidence in his own

heterosexuality. The understanding of what constitutes a friendship between two men has changed since this play was written. The lens through which a modern audience would view this play allows for a skewed perspective – interpreting a platonic friendship of the Renaissance to be one of underlying homoerotic desires. Thus, through the utilization of scholarly articles that place such relationships in proper perspective, a better understanding of this issue can be reached.

Setting the Stage

Throughout Shakespeare's play and Edwards' production, Mercutio is a character who cares for Romeo and attempts to influence him down the right path. Since the beginning of the play, Romeo is in love. Initially it is not with Juliet, but with another, Rosaline. Romeo does not stop and think about his romantic actions, but instead follows his heart wherever it leads him. By now, all of his kinsmen are aware of this, and have grown restless. When he cannot be found, all assume that Romeo chases a maiden of some kind. Mercutio, though skeptical, is always conscious of Romeo's wellbeing, saying, "Why, that same pale-hearted wench, that Rosaline, / Torments him so that he will sure run mad" (2.3.4-5). Romeo returns daily, lost in a trance of emotion that no one can seem to pull him out of by any normal means. Because of his romantic interests, Romeo is often not able to be there for his kin or help them in any way. The night that the Capulet Tybalt sends a letter to the house of Romeo's father, Romeo cannot be found to answer it. Mercutio exclaims, "Where the devil should this Romeo be? Came he / not home tonight?" (2.3.1-2). Regardless of what time period it takes place in, no group of male friends

is happy when one of their own decides to abandon them for someone of the opposite gender, and they do not let him go without some sort of confrontation. This is what Mercutio attempts to do. He knows the kind of man Romeo is, and does not want Romeo's emotions blocking his logic again. Mercutio says,

If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark.

Now will he sit under a medlar tree

And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit

As maids call medlars when they laugh alone. (2.1.34-37)

This passage is an excerpt of Mercutio's talk with Romeo, trying to explain to him how he does not need such relationships. His use of a medlar tree as a metaphor is a pun that references the word "meddler." The Oxford English Dictionary presents the definition of a meddler to be someone who engages in sexual intercourse, or "meddles." Mercutio uses this double meaning to explain to that Romeo's desire for love will leave him alone and sexually frustrated. It is out of brotherly love that Mercutio says such things to Romeo, mocking the concept of love and persuading Romeo from engaging in it.

Romeo's love affair with Rosaline outlines Romeo's constant desire to be in love, as well as illustrates how such desires put Romeo in a foul humor when they are not fulfilled. Rosaline, who does not appear in any scene or have any lines, seems to have captured Romeo's heart, and he laments the tragedy that is her lack of reciprocating feelings. It is this low emotional state that brings Mercutio and Benvolio to encourage Romeo to attend the Capulet ball. There he meets Juliet and releases any feelings for Rosaline in lieu of this new prospect.

The switching of affections from Rosaline for Juliet, without much internal conflict, portrays Romeo as a character that has engaged in such behavior previously, and gives ground for Mercutio to question Romeo's actions. Romeo finds himself in a situation where love has created a challenge in his life. While his affections for Rosaline leave him emotionally defeated due to her lack of returned love, his affections for Juliet stir up hatred between their two houses that has been present longer than anyone can remember. Mercutio watches his friend's emotions wax and wane as women come and go from his life. The purpose of the character of Rosaline is to depict Romeo as a man who is willing to fall blindly into love – making his three-day love affair with Juliet more plausible. If such acts have been witnessed by Mercutio, Romeo's lifelong friend, then Mercutio understands that Juliet is not the first woman to detach Romeo's heart from his brain. Thus, by persuading Romeo against this relationship, Mercutio is not only wishing to help keep Romeo emotionally stable, but he also knows that Romeo is quick to love, and a new – more practical – romantic interest may present herself, if given time.

Joseph Porter comments on their dialogue in act 1, scene 4, where Mercutio attempts to bring up Romeo's spirits, but Romeo is too distraught over Rosaline. "The spirited dialogue of Mercutio and Romeo in scene 4 sets Mercutio's character and continues the characterization of Romeo as it establishes a good deal of the dynamics of their relation for the action to follow" (102). According to Porter, the relationship between the two men is defined early on as Mercutio being very forward and sexual while Romeo is very timid and unreceptive to Mercutio's behavior. This is only half the picture. The dynamics established in this scene

describe the nature of their relationship when Romeo is distraught, which is no longer the case after the Capulet ball, later in that same scene. Once Romeo has met Juliet, his mood changes from dark and brooding to well mannered and jovial, creating a new dynamic between him and Mercutio – one where both men engage in playful banter and a strong sense of rapport is evident between them. Thus, Porter’s statement can only be applicable when Romeo is distraught – a scenario that does not properly depict the nature of the relationship between these two men.

Analysis of Text

In the text, Mercutio’s words appear to maintain the tone of one who opposes love. Yet, a further analysis of his lines reveal that he is not so much an opponent of love as he is a proponent of Romeo’s happiness. As Romeo sulks about, distressed over Rosaline, Mercutio implores him, “If love be rough with you, be rough with love; / Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down” (1.4.25-26). In this passage, Mercutio is not saying to run away from love or avoid it. He acknowledges that love can deal a mighty blow, but one should not sit idle and receive such attacks without retaliation. For every cut given to Romeo by love, he should in turn deal a cut upon love. Mercutio encourages Romeo to stand up for himself and not be controlled by love. The purpose of the phrase “beat love down” is to imply the containment of sexual arousal. If Romeo can be the master of his own emotions, he can be in love without emotional torment. These words are not pushing Romeo away from love, but rather presenting a strategy so that Romeo can be in love and be happy. Porter analyzes this particular exchange, saying “Mercutio himself is rough with love in this

scene, virtually equating it with excrement... Here as later his opposition is only to love and not at all to sexuality, he being one of Shakespeare's most engagingly bawdy characters" (103). This passage describes how Mercutio feels about Romeo's constantly chasing after love. But yet there is part of it that Mercutio cannot completely deny, for Mercutio is presented as a very sexual character, emphasized by his using of sexual innuendos such as "beat love down." Porter explains that it is not out of a desire for Romeo that Mercutio speaks against love, but rather to better explain his own approach to relationships – an approach that is not emotional but sexual.

Through his words, Romeo defines himself as one who blindly follows his heart, an affliction that Mercutio works to rid him of. In the first act of the play, Romeo – still berating his love for Rosaline – exclaims "Alas that love, whose view is muffled still, / Should without eyes see pathways to his will" (1.1.167-68). Romeo tries to remove any responsibility for his love-induced actions by claiming that love is blind; he cannot help himself from loving those whom fate has chosen. Yet in the previously mentioned quote from Mercutio, "If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark," he seeks to insinuate the opposite as true (2.1.34). If the claim of love being blind were accurate, then Romeo cannot define his affections as proper and healthy. Perhaps he is supposed to love another, yet due to the blindness of love, Romeo is mistaken and attempting to court the wrong individual. Mercutio attempts to be a voice of reason. Until now, his attempts to persuade Romeo have yielded poor results, and Romeo has continued following his heart. Thus Mercutio utilizes the rhetorical strategy of using Romeo's own logical conclusions to help persuade him

in the right direction. Mercutio is not speaking against love, but against blind love. He wishes Romeo to take responsibility for his actions and emotions, for then Romeo can refrain from being controlled by love.

Mercutio's concern for Romeo's emotional wellbeing is manifested after Romeo returns from the Capulet ball, Rosaline forgotten and the possibility of mutual love in the forefront of his mind. Romeo's interactions with his kinsmen contrast his previous disheartened attitude. His mood has obviously changed, and they are elated to see that he is no longer in a depressed state. He returns their jokes with his own and is not shaken by Mercutio's inappropriate remarks about Rosaline. With all the Montagues in good spirits, Mercutio remarks,

Why, is not this better now than groaning for
Love? Now art thou sociable, now
Art thou what thou art by art as well as by nature; for
This drivelling love is like a great natural that runs lolling
Up and down to hide his bauble in a hole. (2.3.83-87)

Mercutio is under the impression that the Capulet ball has helped clear Romeo's head and allowed him to once again be happy. It is unknown to Mercutio that Romeo has fallen in love with another, and that is the reason for his mirth. Yet Mercutio is merely concerned about Romeo's happiness. This passage is a proclamation of how glad he is to see Romeo in good spirits. Yes, "drivelling love" – idiotic love – is something to be avoided for it does not bring happiness. The phrase, "to hide his bauble in a hole" depicts an individual set on the inserting of their genitalia in an appropriate orifice. Mercutio presents that love only sets its victim upon a single-

minded path – sating carnal desires. But a healthy life, where one can logically assess their surroundings and make reasonable decisions, yields happiness.

Mercutio does not dissuade Romeo from love out of a desire to keep Romeo for himself, but rather he wants only to see Romeo in good spirits, as is the desire of a close friend. If Romeo's happiness can only be found via love, then so be it. Early on in the play, Mercutio yields, "You are a lover; borrow Cupid's wings, / And soar with them above a common bound" (1.4.15-16). Mercutio speaks against love because it puts Romeo in a sour humor. Yet, if Romeo uses love to his advantage, so that it aids him and does not keep him constantly depressed, then Mercutio is agreeable. Yet from an understanding of Romeo's past, Romeo has not been able to do so, which is why Mercutio berates him, suggesting that perhaps a removal of love from the equation may render a positive solution. Yet, it all boils down to Romeo's happiness. Mercutio only wishes for Romeo to live his life in a way that he can be happy. This can be seen in Mercutio's efforts to raise Romeo's emotions while thoughts of Rosaline plague him, and in Mercutio's elation at Romeo's mirth after the Capulet ball.

Analysis of Stage

Unlike today's society, the Renaissance held a different view of male friendship, where it was not uncommon for men to hold hands and share intimate feelings (Bray 42). Mercutio is a character that makes provocative statements and attempts to be very persuasive in the matter of Romeo's romantic life. Looking

through the lens of this current day and age, such actions would be considered homoerotic, or non-heteronormative at the least.

Yet when words are on a page, and there is no stage direction, it can be difficult to properly understand how things are meant to be said and performed. Gale Edwards, the director of *Romeo and Juliet* (2010) at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater (CST), set out to interpret this play through a heightened sense of sexuality and draw the audience to understand that “...it’s a play about generations. The parent generation fails the lovers at every turn... And the tension and lack of understanding between the generations is at the center of the play” (10-11). These themes not only apply to Mercutio, but also other characters such as Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet, and the Nurse.

Mercutio (Ariel Shafir) makes lewd gestures and taunts Romeo (Jeff Lillico), though it does not put off any of the other Montagues that sit and watch, implying a level of comfort and acceptance. These men have all been friends for a while, and see no strangeness in the relationship that has unfolded between these two. In fact, they encourage him by laughing at his jokes and asking him to bestow his wisdom upon them. After the Capulet ball, Romeo cannot be found and speculation is made that perhaps he encountered Tybalt (Zach Appelman). Benvolio (Steve Haggard) and several other Montagues encircle Mercutio, and upon Benvolio’s question, “Why, what is Tybalt?” all of the Montagues sit down in a swift motion, appearing attentive to what Mercutio has to say (2.3.17). This eager and attentive audience facilitates Mercutio’s desire to share his knowledge with them.

Though Edwards' Mercutio steps outside social acceptability with his body language, his actions are not without reciprocation. Mercutio makes full use of the stage, allowing his long coat to emphasize his dramatic movements. He mockingly performs sexual acts both upon bystanders and, when there is no one within reach, upon the air. Some of his more subtle gestures merely involve a thrusting of hips, while others are much more elaborate – his hand becoming a phallus or the miming of cunnilingus upon the absent Rosaline. At first Romeo regards these actions with indifference, distressed by the harsh realities of unreciprocated love. But once Romeo meets Juliet (Joy Farmer-Clary) and lifts his spirits, Romeo does not back away. Romeo laughs and playfully pushes Mercutio after Mercutio smells his crotch and comments on its smell of fish, implying that Romeo was out engaging in sexual acts (2.3.25-26). This scene demonstrates that Mercutio's actions are not specific to him, but rather a way in which men engaged in banter, not unlike what may be seen if entering a men's locker-room.

As both Mercutio and Romeo are young men, it is understandable that their actions are those of immature and emotion driven youth. However it has been theorized that through some of Mercutio's actions he is making sexual advances on Romeo. David Tennant, who played the part of Romeo, claims that Mercutio's "endless vitriol must be based on something more than locker-room horseplay and that the character's fury must stem from a feeling, however subconscious, of sexual jealousy and betrayal" (118). Porter has an opinion that coincides with Tennant. "These references of Mercutio's to Romeo's phallus add up to a highly Mercurial stance combining an opposition to love, an amiable erotic permissiveness, and a

phallocentrism that admits traces of homoeroticism”(157). Yes, the Edwards production depicts Mercutio seductively moving his pelvic region on Romeo, as he compares Romeo to a fool that runs “up and down to hide his bauble in a hole” (2.3.87). But this only means that Mercutio expresses confidence in his sexuality and thus has no concerns with using such methods to further frustrate Romeo. Though it is argued that Mercutio is jealous, not wanting Romeo to be swept away by some maiden because of his feelings for Romeo, other explanations for his actions remain. While Mercutio moves in ways some would deem inappropriate for a heterosexual friendship, grabbing Romeo’s genitals and denying Romeo personal space, he does so in a way of exaggeration. Through the exaggeration of his actions, Mercutio is purposefully trying to make Romeo uncomfortable while still berating him on the subject of his love interests. It is all part of his flamboyant personality. Such a personality extends in other, nonsexual ways. As the Montagues prepare to attend the Capulet ball, Mercutio calls for a mask. It is lined with feathers and reminiscent of a bird. After Mercutio puts it on, he strikes a sudden pose, arms elongated and one foot in the air. A loud bird-like squawk accompanies this gesture, much to the delight of the Montagues. Such a performance emphasizes that Mercutio’s enthusiasm extends beyond sexual innuendo.

Throughout the Edwards’ production, Mercutio does not display romantic affection for Romeo, but rather through relaying of advice, establishes a teacher-student relationship. Accompanying the script is the prompt book, complete with stage directions, blocking charts, and lighting instructions. All instructions are given by Edwards, ensuring that every minute detail of the play is purposeful. Every time

that Mercutio wishes to relay his knowledge to Romeo, an arrow is present in the prompt book, directing one or both of them into a square in the very center of the stage. This is not just for these two men, but also occurs when Friar Laurence (David Lively) seeks to give Romeo advice, and when the Nurse (Ora Jones) attempts to persuade Juliet in the way she believes is right. It is in this area, which I have dubbed “the instructional zone,” that teachers interact with their students. This section of stage is separate from where the bed is raised, the location of Romeo and Juliet’s consummation, and the balcony, the location of Romeo and Juliet’s proclamation of love. This zone exists for the interaction between teacher and student, not those engaged in sexual relationships. Though it is true that Mercutio acts in a way that some deem questionable in reference to his sexual orientation, he always does so in the instructional zone. Thus such actions can be interpreted as existing apart from any sexual desire in the Edwards production.

While the instructional zone reinforces the heteronormativity of Mercutio, the contrasting of his actions to those of Tybalt present the possibility that it is not Mercutio but rather Tybalt who maintains underlying homoerotic desires. Tybalt rarely wears clothes that properly cover his body. At his most modest, he wears a full vest with no shirt underneath. Other times, he wears a half-vest, covering only his upper torso and very little of his back. Mercutio predominantly wears a long, billowing coat, which he utilizes to add emphasis to his statements. He is seen without it, but he is usually still wearing a long sleeved shirt. When Mercutio’s outfit is at the low point of modesty, he wears a sleeveless undershirt, paralleling that of Tybalt’s most modest outfit. At the Capulet ball, while the Montagues, Mercutio

included, wear simple masks that cover their eyes and nose, Tybalt wears the helmet of a centurion, the feathers sticking high into the air. Such a headdress draws allusions to a rooster or peacock, attempting to bring attention to Tybalt's manhood, as if it were in question.

Not only do Tybalt's clothes attempt to draw attention to his manhood, but also his mannerisms and actions do the same. When it is brought forward that Montagues have infiltrated the Capulet ball, Tybalt's first instinct is to inform Lord Capulet (John Judd) that he will rid the party of them – an attempt to gain recognition for performing a very masculine task. Yet when Lord Capulet insists that Tybalt do nothing, Tybalt is outraged. The opportunity to exert his manliness and remove his enemies from a party has been taken away from him, and he challenges Lord Capulet. In reply, Lord Capulet reprimands him harshly, both with words and sword, driving Tybalt to the ground, whimpering. Here a very frail and effeminate Tybalt is presented, as if this is his true nature.

The manner in which Tybalt and Mercutio interact displays a strong contrast in their sexuality. Upon meeting Mercutio, Tybalt attempts to provoke him into fighting, asking after Romeo and implying that due to the homoerotic nature of their relationship, Mercutio should know where he is. The specific verb Tybalt chooses is "consort," for which the Oxford English Dictionary provides two definitions. The first is "to accompany, keep company with." The other definition implies that there is a sexual component to the relationship between these two men. Nicholas F. Radel argues "...that Tybalt employs the second sense of the term in an effort to turn the normally erotic discourse of friendship into a discourse of sodomy. As Bray suggests

was possible, Tybalt manipulates linguistic codes to imply that the relationship between Romeo and Mercutio is disorderly” (93). Upon hearing such an accusation, Mercutio casually disregards any validity Tybalt thinks it has. It is not this accusation made against Mercutio and Romeo that brings Mercutio to fight Tybalt, but rather Romeo’s refusal to defend his own honor once he arrives. If such a claim by Tybalt had any merit, it would have provoked Mercutio if not to fight, at least to anger. But it does not. It is more plausible that Tybalt makes this accusation to draw attention to the possibility of homoeroticism in others, and portray himself supremely masculine by comparison.

While Mercutio is very physically comfortable around both men and women, Tybalt shies away from any physical contact. Mercutio’s actions represent a confidence in his own sexual orientation, something that Tybalt appears to lack. As Tybalt and Mercutio fight, Mercutio reinforces this concept, kissing Tybalt in the midst of battle. Such an act would not bother Mercutio who has no questions about his sexual leanings, and thus would only serve to enrage his opponent – an individual who is made uncomfortable by such physical affection from a man.¹ If Tybalt had no inner turmoil about homoerotic desires, then such an act would not have sent him into the rage that it does.

Not only are Mercutio’s actions publicly accepted by his kinsmen, but also they are welcomed by Romeo when he is in good spirits, showing the true nature of their friendship. After Romeo has met Juliet and is engaging with his kinsmen, he also participates in physically aggressive behavior. Romeo had previously been in a

¹ A connection can be made to the popular cartoon character Bugs Bunny, who often would place a kiss upon his pursuers for the sole purpose of inciting anger.

depressed state, and any physically playful acts from Mercutio had not been returned, perhaps presenting an initial understanding of homoeroticism. Yet after Romeo's spirits have been raised, he matches Mercutio grab-for-grab. Raymond V. Utterback describes this interaction, saying, "... when Romeo has dropped his affected posture as the despairing lover of Rosaline, do the two young men appear as dramatic equals. Then Mercutio welcomes Romeo as a fit companion, significantly in his own terms" (105). As Mercutio talks about Romeo's ventures of the heart, he pats Romeo's crotch. Though this would have previously merited a backing away on Romeo's part, instead Romeo turns around and extends his buttocks, playfully inviting a slap – to which Mercutio happily obliges. This interaction is not hidden or behind closed doors. All of the Montague boys are there, laughing and enjoying themselves. To them, nothing is out of the ordinary, and it serves to show the audience that these sorts of interactions between two friends are not strange but acceptable. This scene takes place inside the instructional zone, with Mercutio maintaining a steady flow of advice and exclamations of mirth. It is through stage direction, blocking, and costuming – all purposefully instructed by Edwards – that these two men are presented as close platonic friends, reaffirming a heteronormative normative reading of the original playtext.

Male Friendship in the Renaissance

To properly understand the nature of the relationship between Romeo and Mercutio aside from studying the play in text and on stage, male friendship in the Renaissance must be defined. Both a platonic relationship and a homoerotic

relationship must be outlined before proper conclusions can be made in regards to these two men.

James M. Saslow addresses the presence of homosexual relationships and their nature. He admits, "Sodomy was practiced across the entire spectrum of middle- and lower-class occupations: London merchants and actors, Venetian barber-surgeons and *gondolieri*, Genevan printers, laborers, and servants, and the navy" (93). According to Saslow, there is no doubt that such practices were prevalent at the time, and such a relationship between Mercutio and Romeo cannot be ruled out as an option on time-period alone. However, Saslow continues on to explain that most homosexual practices were between adult men and adolescent boys. They were not between men of similar age; such is the nature of intimate relationships in which both parties are emotionally invested. And though such practices were held, they were illegal and not flaunted or made obvious (93-94).

Alan Stewart goes one step further, explaining that those who practiced sodomy were "a dangerous other, linked with heresy, foreignness, and the devil" (90). The Catholic Church had condemned such actions, equating them with other villainous acts such as rape, adultery, witchcraft, and treason (89). The condemning of homoerotic acts could not be done solely on the basis of a level of discomfort due to its abnormality. In order to properly dissuade the public from engaging in such acts, logical reasoning must be implemented. James M. Bromley explains that "The anus, then, connects to psychic health insofar as it remains an expulsive organ, and Renaissance anatomy texts carefully note the body ensures that waste cannot reverse its course because such a reversal gestures toward the anus as penetrated –

a presumed exit is used as an entrance to the body” (51). This passage depicts the understanding that through the anus one only excretes, and using it for any other purpose than excretion is unnatural, and thus an abomination against God who created the natural way of things.

The relationship of Romeo and Mercutio is between two men that do not fall under the confines of Saslow’s definition of a homoerotic relationship. They had grown up together and shared a similar age, unlike the characteristic age difference between same-gender sex partners of that period. Mercutio offered his advice to Romeo for he knew how Romeo acted. This knowledge is based on years of friendship. With such practices being regarded as illegal, Mercutio would not act in such a lewd and flamboyant manner if there were true homoerotic feelings behind his actions. When his words insinuate sexual acts in the text, or when he acts physically aggressive in the Edwards production, those who witness such behavior do not condemn him or look on disgusted. If they believed that such actions were the manifestation of homoerotic desire, they would not laugh and encourage him to continue.

Such a definition of a non-platonic relationship between two men also serves to reinforce the possibility that Edwards wished to portray Tybalt as having underlying homoerotic desires. Due to the manner in which he avoids the contact of other men, tries to draw attention to his manhood, and is enraged by Mercutio’s sexual comfort, Tybalt is presented as sexually uneasy. He does not wish to act in a manner that could be perceived as homoerotic, for such actions are illegal. Yet

Mercutio conducts himself in such a way, for he does not concern himself with such underlying emotions as a possibility.

Alan Bray, a respected scholar in this field, has studied many first hand documents and journals, gathering a strong understanding of the nature of a platonic friendship between men in the Renaissance. Bray describes male friendship to be much more physically intimate than that of male friendships today. It was not uncommon for platonic male friends to share beds, kiss, or publicly embrace. In fact, the engaging in such acts signified to others that an especially close bond was held between these two men (42). The term “bedfellow” was used to describe men that would sleep together. It implied that these particular men were privy to each other’s secrets and most intimate knowledge. The large manors of the time had hidden passageways in-between rooms that allowed for a man to leave his bed and join his bedfellow. The location of these passageways was common knowledge, and it was no secret as to where certain men went in the night (42). By displaying affection publicly, it announced to all in attendance that there was a strong emotional bond between the two men. Such a bond, as present with bedfellows, implied an extra level of respect. A man would trust the word of his bedfellow above all others, and a bedfellow’s advice was held in the highest possible regard (43).

The actions made by Mercutio to Romeo are of a nature that is encompassed by Bray’s definition of a platonic friendship. The physical intimacy displayed between these two men on stage, accompanied by their words in the text, describe only the closest of friends. From the understanding of the concept of bedfellows, the assumption can be made that such was the relationship between these two men.

They were publicly physical in a way that society viewed as acceptable. The attempts made by Mercutio to persuade Romeo were that of someone who was to have an unparalleled authority. Mercutio attempts to utilize the trust that should be allotted to him due to their friendship in order to dissuade Romeo from blindly following his heart, for he knows it will only end in sadness. Such is the duty of a friend as close as Mercutio.

It is Mercutio's loyalty to Romeo based on their intimate friendship, not underlying homoerotic desire, which spurns Mercutio to fight Tybalt. Mercutio is strong-willed and prepared to put actions behind his words, but it is not for his own reputation that he fights – it is for Romeo. Luis M. Garcia Mainar explains that “it will be Romeo's refusal to engage in a fight with Tybalt, his self-humiliation at the Capulets' attempts to offend him and start a fight, that Mercutio will not be able to stand, which will lead him to challenge the ‘King of Cats’” (31). Thus, when it is clear that Romeo has not and will not listen to what Mercutio has to say, Mercutio feels betrayed. If Romeo had not had feelings for Juliet, he would not have attempted to calm Mercutio and Tybalt's fight. And when Tybalt slays Mercutio from underneath Romeo's arm, Mercutio is betrayed on many fronts. Romeo has rejected Mercutio's council and acted against it, showing his lack of trust and respect for their friendship. Romeo, through his attempt to save Tybalt, the enemy, causes Mercutio's fatal wound. It is then, as his life slips away, that Mercutio realizes that Romeo has thrown away their friendship in lieu of love, and love's consequences have already begun. Thus, physically wounded by Tybalt and emotionally wounded by Romeo, Mercutio cries “A plague on both your houses!” (3.1.106). Romeo shows what truly

matters to him – the love of a Capulet. Mercutio is willing to die in order to preserve Romeo's honor, but Romeo does not appear to reciprocate this sentiment. Thus, with the broken heart of a man whose best friend denied him, he makes this final exclamation.

Conclusions

With the issue of the acceptability of homosexuality becoming a prominent issue in modern society, it casts a new light on relationships. The nature of male friendships is brought into question and a form of homosexual criticism is applied to various works, past and present. Such a society wishes to redefine *Romeo and Juliet*. And though it is not my desire to oppose the movement of equal rights for practicing homosexuals, it is my duty as a scholar of literature to ensure the most accurate interpretation of this play is understood.

Despite the presence of homoeroticism in the Renaissance, the friendship between Romeo and Mercutio does not exhibit the signs many scholars associate with such a relationship. Edwards' theatrical portrayal of Tybalt, when compared to Mercutio is much more sexually effeminate, with costuming to suggest that it is Tybalt who maintains underlying homoerotic tendencies. Mercutio's behavior, though interpreted on stage as very flamboyant, only reinforces the understanding that his platonic friendship with Romeo is intimate and that they are both secure in their sexuality. The utilizing of a particular production, though helpful, does not encompass all possible interpretations. With each director comes a different approach and interpretation of Shakespeare's original play. Jay L. Halio writes,

“Here I shall be concerned not with adaptations, fascinating through they often are, but with interpretations; that is, with the playscript *Romeo and Juliet* as it has been variously presented over the centuries” (60). Though different interpretations of this play may present themselves, each one allows for a new understanding of the original text. The uniqueness of Gale Edwards’s production allows for a better analysis of any possible homoerotic undertones, via its heightened sexuality. Both a careful examination of the playtext and consideration of Edwards’s contemporary production confirm a heteronormative reading of Mercutio and his friendship with Romeo.

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