

The Functions of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*

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Romeo and Juliet is a famous tragedy written by William Shakespeare. The plot is based on an Italian tale but Shakespeare makes it more dramatic by developing specific characters, such as the Nurse and Mercutio. The plot is set in Verona in sixteenth century. The Montagues and the Couplets are two distinguished families in Verona; however, they see each other as enemies. They are fighting all the time. Romeo and Juliet, who respectively are Montague and Couplet, fall in love at their first sight. In the end, two star-crossed lovers are dead. The Montagues and the Couplets reconciled by their children's death and end the feud which has lasted for generations.

Mercutio is a fictional character who does not appear in the original version and Shakespeare adds him into the play. Mercutio is neither a Montague nor a Couplet. Because he is a friend of Romeo, he stands on Montague's side. In fact, Mercutio simply appears in four scenes in *Romeo and Juliet*; in other words, he is not the main character in the play. Nevertheless, I think he is an attractive and memorable character in the play. Actually, Mercutio's name is related to the word "mercurial," meaning "having an unpredictable and fast changing mood," an accurate description of

Mercutio's personality (Wikipedia contributors). Moreover, he also plays a vital role in the play. The following paragraphs will explain more details in the functions of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. The functions will be divided into two parts, including entertaining audience and being a turning-point figure in the play.

First of all, Mercutio usually plays on words; that is, his words are usually interesting or there are implications behind his words. He always tells jokes and puns. Romeo once describes him as, "A gentlemen who loves to hear himself talk, will speak more in a minute than he will stand to in a month" (Shakespeare 933). In addition, he is very fun loving and has a genuine love for life. These characteristics make the play more interesting and entertaining. When Romeo is distressed by his love for Rosaline, he states that love is too rough. Mercutio's response is that "If love be rough with you, be rough with love. Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down" (Shakespeare 916). Through these words, it is obvious that not only Mercutio's words are sharp, but his personality is straightforward. These lines also indicate the sexual relationships between males and females. For Mercutio, love means sex and females are born to please males. On the contrary, Romeo believes in true love. Moreover, in Mercutio's monologue which is also called the speech of Queen Mab, Mercutio shows us that his ability of using the language is fabulous. We can almost picture the image of Queen Mab, who is a fairy that brings dreams to sleepers.

Through the Queen Mab imagery, Mercutio suggests that all desires and fantasies are as nonsensical and fragile as Mab, and that they are basically corrupting. This point of view contrasts starkly with that of Romeo and Juliet, who see their love as real and ennobling (SparkNotes Editors).

When uttering the speech of Queen Mab, Mercutio also shows funny actions to audience. Audience will burst into laughter and think that Mercutio is full of sense of humor. Mercutio intends to mock Romeo as a dreamer in a sarcastic way. His dream lover, Rosaline, does not even know the existence of Romeo. Through Mercutio's dramatic using of words and obvious personality, *Romeo and Juliet* becomes more energetic and lively.

Secondly, Mercutio plays a crucial role in the play. As long as Mercutio appears, definitely something vital will take place. One is that Mercutio persuades Romeo to attend the ball held by the Couplets in hopes of meeting Rosaline and that is the place where Romeo first meets Juliet. Mercutio challenges Romeo whether Rosaline is the most beautiful woman or not; therefore, he urges Romeo to go to the ball to see other women. This is exactly the turning point of this play. In the ball, Romeo meets Juliet and falls in love at their first sight. The other is Mercutio's death; his death changes the whole play into a tragedy. *Romeo and Juliet* could have been a comedy;

nonetheless, after Mercutio's death, everything changes into dark side. Mercutio's death is sudden, and makes death a dark reality for several characters causing a domino effect of tragic fate that ultimately takes the lives of Tybalt, Paris, Romeo, Juliet, and Lady Montague ("Reference.com"). Tybalt accidentally slays Mercutio; this evokes Romeo's wrath to take revenge for his best friends. Then, Romeo kills Tybalt and is exiled from Verona. Subsequently, a chain of misery takes place and the whole play becomes a tragedy. Perhaps in some aspects, Mercutio is also the symbol of energy and delight. When Mercutio is about to take his last breath, he says that "A plague o' both your houses. They have made worm' meat of me. I have it, and soundly, too. Your houses!" (Shakespeare 939). Instead of blaming on the Couplets, Mercutio dies cursing both Montagues and Capulets. This may be regarded as a change because Mercutio has never been so serious before. He has never expressed any disagreement of the relationship between the Montagues and the Capulets (Van Gorp). As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, Mercutio is neither a Montague nor a Couplet; however, he stands on the Montague's side because he is Romeo's friend. Mercutio is faithful to himself as well as his friends; thus, he gets furious when Tybalt is arrogantly challenging Romeo to a duel. When he is going to die, he realizes that the family feud between the Montagues and the Couplets is nonsense. Being a figure whose death is the turning point in Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio plays a functional role

in the play.

All in all, Mercutio is an outstanding character in *Romeo and Juliet*. It is difficult for audience to ignore this attractive role. His functions in the play are entertaining audience and being a turning-point figure. To begin with, he always says jests and puns to make the whole play livelier and the audience will burst out laughing at his words and funny actions. Next, his appearance is crucial to link the plots. He convinces Romeo to attend the ball held by Couplet and that is the place where Romeo first meets Juliet. In addition, Mercutio's death turns the atmosphere of the play. From now on, *Romeo and Juliet* becomes a tragedy. It is a success that Shakespeare adds this fantastic role to *Romeo and Juliet*.

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