

QUEERING THE PERFORMANCE: MERCUTIO AS AN EMBLEM OF NON-NORMATIVITY IN *ROMEO AND JULIET*

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ABSTRACT: William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is seen, more often than not, as a strictly normative tale of heterosexual love. A few of its queer aspects, however, have not gone unnoticed by directors and scholars. The present paper focuses on some of those aspects. More specifically, it is concerned with the portrayal of Mercutio in two filmic adaptations namely Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996). Borrowing concepts from performance and queer theory, this paper aims to investigate how the portrayal of the pivotal Mercutio brings out a potential queerness to the aforementioned performances.

KEYWORDS: *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare. *Queer*. Mercutio.

Artigo recebido: 28 ago. 2016.
Aceito: 10 out. 2016.

DALMASO, Renata Lucena. Queering the performance: Mercutio as an emblem of non-normativity in *Romeo and Juliet*. *Scripta Uniandrade*, v. 14, n. 2 (2016), p. 72-85.
Curitiba, Paraná, Brasil
Data de edição: 27 dez. 2016.

SUBVERTENDO A PERFORMANCE: MERCÚCIO COMO SÍMBOLO DE NÃO-NORMATIVIDADE EM *ROMEU E JULIETA*

RESUMO: *Romeu e Julieta*, de William Shakespeare, uma peça paradigmática do amor romântico, é muitas vezes vista estritamente como um conto normativo de amor heterossexual. Seus aspectos *queer*, no entanto, não passaram despercebidos para alguns diretores e pesquisadores. É justamente nesses aspectos que a presente pesquisa se concentra. Mais especificamente, este artigo foca o papel de Mercúcio em duas adaptações da peça para o cinema: *Romeu e Julieta*, de Franco Zeffirelli (1968), e *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, de Baz Luhrmann (1996). Usando conceitos das teorias de performance e *queer*, este trabalho busca investigar como a caracterização de Mercúcio traz à tona o potencial *queer* e subversivo da peça.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Romeu e Julieta*. Shakespeare. *Queer*. Mercúcio.

William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is taken by many to be the paradigm of romantic love. Be it for the play's "mythic intensity" or because it allegedly "conveys a *universal* legend of love [that appeals] to every age and culture," it has undoubtedly been regarded as one of the greatest love stories of Western literature (BLOOM, 1998, p. 90; HALIO, 1998, p. 89, my emphasis). Regrettably, as with most tropes and themes dotted with the (not-so-encompassing) "universal" label, *Romeo and Juliet* is regularly seen as a strictly normative tale of a pair of heterosexual star-crossed lovers that fight the odds and social difference (RAMPONE, 2011, p. 143;

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AILLES, 2000, p. 14; GOLDBERG, 1994, p. 220). A few of its queer aspects, however, have not gone unnoticed by some directors and scholars. It is with those aspects that the present paper is concerned, more specifically with the portrayal of Mercutio in two filmic adaptations — Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) — and how such portrayal brings out a potential queerness to the aforementioned performances.

The aim of finding a potential queerness in *Romeo and Juliet* should not, however, imply that there is, in fact, an inherent queer meaning waiting to be found and uncovered in the play, or brought out of the closet as it were. Far from it, as the assumption that “Shakespeare’s texts are stable and authoritative, that meaning is immanent in them” would fall into the same “universal” fallacy that this paper seeks to destabilize (BULMAN, 1996, p. 1). Since the very idea of universality — and, for that matter, what is even qualified as a possibility for the “universal” — is subject to the contingencies of the context(s) in which it is perceived, it is fair to say that what a given society at one point in time views as universal or immanent is, ironically, unstable (p. 3). Therefore, rather than looking at the playtext as something constant and imbued with a fixed, inherent meaning, regarding the play through its different performances, with the “unpredictable, often playful intersection of history, material conditions, social contexts, and reception” attributed to them, is much more fitting to the type of analysis intended in this paper (p. 1).

Another point that needs clarification is the use of the term “queer” in this essay. As Annamarie Jagose argues, despite the fact that “queer” stems from the gay and lesbian liberationist and feminist models, it “[m]arks both a continuity and a break with [them]” (1996, p. 75). The terms “homosexual”, “gay”, “lesbian”, and “queer” have, indeed, all been used at different moments in history to indicate some form or another of same-sex desire, but to imply that

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there would be an etymological evolution, or even a direct semantic correspondence, among those terms would be misleading (p. 73-4). In fact, “[q]ueer is not simply the latest example in a series of words that describe and constitute same-sex desire transhistorically but rather a consequence of the constructionist problematising of any allegedly universal term” (p. 74). As such, “queer” is a term that resists any form of clear definition, for the act of pinning its meaning down would reduce it to simply a new form of identity category. It is not within the scope of this paper to delve too much into this debate, it is only necessary to establish the different nuances of these terminologies and, more specifically, of “queer” not as a term denoting a fixed identity, but instead as a contingent term related to the very contestation of identities (BUTLER, 1993, p. 228).

The non-specificity of “queer” is, as a matter of fact, much more suited to work with non-normative sexualities in the Renaissance context, since our notion of “homosexuality” as a category of identity is as recent as the late nineteenth century, when, according to Michel Foucault, “it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul” (1978, p. 43). Consequently, to view homoeroticism or same-sex desire as “gay” or “homosexual” in the Renaissance age would be anachronistic and socially inaccurate, whereas to regard it as something “queer”, on the other hand, would be much more appropriate within that specific context (THOMAS, 2009, p. 21). Within this framework of a queer-nuanced performance, Mercutio’s character can, at times, work as a major element—though by all means not the sole one—to emphasize queerness in a production, and it is that possibility that is the focus of this paper.

Mercutio’s lasciviousness and bawdiness is part of the greatness of his character. Perhaps for that very reason he is said to be “the most notorious scene stealer in all of Shakespeare”, one that, in fact, had to be killed off, lest he should “kill Shakespeare and hence

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the [entire] play” (BLOOM, 2004, p. 202). He is the sole responsible for a good part of the sexual innuendo and puns that abound in the play. Probably due to the striking number of obscenities—“at least 175 puns”—a lot of the studies of sexuality in *Romeo and Juliet* have “focused [primarily on the] extensive bawdiness of the word play(s)” (BLOOM, 2004, p. 202; AILLES, 2000, p. 22).

But to what extent is it possible to view Mercutio’s blatant sexuality and bawdiness as something queer? Eve Sedgwick’s concept of “homosocial desire” is a crucial answer to that particular question. According to Sedgwick,

“[...] “Homosocial desire”, to begin with, is a kind of oxymoron. “Homosocial” is a word occasionally used in history and social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with “homosexual”, and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from “homosexual”. In fact, it is applied to such activities as “male bonding”, which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality. To draw the “homosocial” back into the orbit of “desire”, of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted. (1985, p. 1-2).

The nuances and contradictions inherent in Sedgwick’s use of the term seem particularly fitting to a character as complex as Mercutio, as directors and actors often play with the erotic potential of the performance in relation to the other male characters.

A number of elements contribute to this particular reading of his character, from the strength of the homosocial desire seen in the group to which he and Romeo belong to the fact that Mercutio openly and insistently opposes the idea of (heterosexual) love, and, finally, to Tybalt’s implication that Mercutio “consort[s] with Romeo” (II.i.45).

Mercutio functions as foil to Romeo’s poetic devotion to love, denouncing “love [as nothing more than] an open arse and a pop’rin

pear” (BLOOM, 2004, p. 207). In several moments of the play, Mercutio accuses Romeo of being a slave to love, such as in the following example:

Mercutio. Alas, poor Romeo, he is already dead,
stabb'd with a white wench's black eye, run through
the ear with a love-song, the very pin of his heart
cleft with the blind bow-boy's butt-shaft [...] (II.iv.13-16)

In this specific scene, Mercutio expresses his contempt for Romeo's attitude towards love and forebodes the latter's untimely death because of it. The possibility that “Mercutio's incessant bawdiness is the mask for what may be a repressed homoeroticism” (BLOOM, 2004, p. 207) is something that can be either emphasized or downplayed in this scene and the two filmic productions selected for this paper deal with this issue in different ways

Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 production was considered “the embodiment of youth culture, celebrating sexuality, peace, and freedom” at the time of its release (RAMPONE, 2011, p. 85). In the midst of the sexual and generational revolution that permeated the sixties, Zeffirelli's production managed to capture some of the audaciousness of the time by bringing to “the fore the nudity of the hero and heroine as well as the homoerotic elements that inhere in *Romeo and Juliet* in the relationship between Romeo and Mercutio, which are located at the margins of the play” (p. 85). The aforementioned scene (scene iv, in Act II) is a good place to investigate in what manner those elements manage to come out of the margins through the queerness associated with Mercutio's character. My selection of this particular scene (II. iv), instead of the apparently more obvious one in which Tybalt implies a possible queer connection between Mercutio and Romeo (III. i), took into consideration the fact that it involves a more joyous interaction and display of the homosocial desire and bonds specifically between the characters

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Romeo and Mercutio, whereas the latter scene focuses on the dialogue between Mercutio and Benvolio and between Mercutio and Tybalt. Undoubtedly, both productions emphasize some interesting queer elements related to Mercutio in the first scene of the third act as well. I chose, however, to concentrate on the actual interactions between Romeo and Mercutio.

The scene starts at the top floor of a building overlooking Verona, with Mercutio and Benvolio discussing Romeo's whereabouts and his helplessness when it comes to love. Mercutio's and Benvolio's position in relation to one another, as the latter is sitting on the edge of the balcony and the former speaking closely, could be seen as a reversal of Romeo and Juliet's similar balcony scene, which has happened only moments earlier. This correlation could be seen to indicate just how strong the bonds of homosocial desire are and why breaking them would have such an impact. Some readings of the play indicate that, in fact, *Romeo and Juliet* is a "story about a young man struggling to leave the homosocial pack whose bonds of blood (-sport) militate against the normative demands of adult heterosexual marriage" (FRECCERO, 2011, p. 303). In that sense, Zeffirelli's production seems to further emphasize such bonds by the suggestion of an association between the two balcony scenes.

Other indication of the strength in those bonds of homosocial desire between the characters can be perceived by means of the constant physical touching among them as a sign of belonging to the group, at first between Mercutio and Benvolio and then between Mercutio and Romeo. In fact, Mercutio only touches Romeo when the latter joins in the word-play games and banter being exchanged amongst them, thus indicating [albeit erroneously] that he is no longer enslaved by the romantic infatuations that had ensnared him away from the pack. Romeo actually is welcomed back after saying "Thy wit is a very bitter sweeting, it is a most sharp sauce," a line that in the playtext is attributed to Mercutio, which, as an interpellation, works to

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emphasize the strength of the relationship between the two characters (II.iv.80).

Up until that moment, Mercutio keeps a certain distance, first pretending not to see Romeo or hear his calling, and then accusing the latter of giving them “the slip” and even calling forth to Benvolio to come between them, thus signaling Romeo’s separation from the group. Once Romeo is recognized as one of the pack again, their homosocial bonds are reaffirmed through Mercutio’s embrace. Mercutio’s role as the leader in the group is clearly established as the character’s motion and attitude instigate the rest of the band to follow his cue, along with the camera.

Mercutio’s queerness and the overall tone of homoeroticism in the group is further suggested by the character’s gesture as he welcomes Romeo back, and reaffirms his contempt for romantic love:

Mercutio Why, is this not better than groaning for love? Now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo; now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature, for this driveling love is like a great natural that runs lolling up and down to hide his bable in a hole.

Benvolio Stop there, stop there.

Mercutio Thou desirest me to stop in my tale against the hair.

Benvolio Thou wouldst else have made my tale large.

Mercutio O, thou art deceiv’d; I would have made it short, for I was come to the whole depth of my tale, and meant indeed to occupy the argument no longer.

As Mercutio speaks the lines “hide his bable in a hole”, he puts his arm through Benvolio’s, mimicking the act of sexual penetration.

Benvolio looks alarmed at the thought of others witnessing such scene as if that sort of behavior should not be seen in public; this is perceived due to the fact that he looks over his shoulder and then warns “Stop there, stop there”. Mercutio, however, continues firmly locked in Benvolio’s arm, still mimicking an erect penis; that is, until the utterance of the word “come”, when he promptly lowers his

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arm and disengages it from Benvolio's, to the amusement of the whole group. The fact that a homoerotic reenactment of sexual intercourse is presented as a lesson to Romeo reaffirms the bonds of homosocial desire within the pack; the emphasis on Mercutio's role as the leader and initiator of these games and explicit displays of affection, on its turn, stresses the queerness of his character.

Baz Luhrmann's 1996 adaptation of the play shows how different aspects of Mercutio's queerness can be emphasized. Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* is set in a modern day Verona Beach, a colorful Miami-like city, where the Capulets and Montagues are rival families in crime.. The post-modernist feel of the film reflects the (then) new youth culture of the nineties, which is marked much more by an alienated and isolated mood than by a rebellious one, as it was the case with the sixties generation (RAMPONE, 2011, p. 87). Within this setting, the queerness associated with the character of Mercutio is portrayed right from his very first appearance in the film, when he delivers the famous Queen Mab speech in drag. If Zeffirelli's production highlighted the "homoerotic elements [...] in the relationship between Romeo and Mercutio [...] at the margins of the play", Luhrmann's, on the other hand, brought those elements directly to the fore (p. 85). Luhrmann's choice of a black actor, Harold Perrineau, for the part of Mercutio in a predominantly white cast is particularly emblematic of the character's non-normativity.

Mercutio's first appearance in Luhrmann's film, as a muscular black man with dreadlocks, in drag, sets the tone of his character for the rest of the film. His drugs can be seen as the catalyst for the ball, or, for that matter, for the entire play—the double suicide of the star-crossed lovers read as a mere "bad trip" induced by chemicals. In this scenario, true love is indeed a delusion, and Mercutio is the first to call this out to Romeo.

In clear contrast with the character's first appearance in the

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film—in which he is shown in a festive disposition, in drag, getting ready for the Capulet’s costume party—Mercutio starts scene iv, Act II in a taciturn mood. As he approaches Benvolio on a payphone by the beach, now in “civilian” clothes, he aggressively demands: “Where the devil should this Romeo be?” The dialogue that follows, with Mercutio cursing Romeo and his helplessness towards Rosaline, takes place as the former storms out towards the beach followed by Benvolio. Mercutio is clearly in a bad mood in the midst of his curses on Rosaline and love, but his temper changes when he hears of Tybalt’s challenge—a change of mood that is emphasized by a change in the incidental soundtrack. The challenge would indicate a return to the homosocial sphere and it seems to please Mercutio, indicated by the first smile that crosses his face since the beginning of the scene.

With the news of Tybalt’s challenge, Mercutio declares in a clearly effeminate way: “Alas, poor Romeo, he is already dead”. He then alternates between this effeminate manner and a faux aggressive stance while wrestling and duel practicing with Benvolio, which again suggests the correlation of the two types of behavior and the overall queer tone of this sort of male interaction and bonding. As Romeo joins them, Mercutio’s mood becomes sour again. He fends off Romeo’s approaches, even physically pushing him aside, until the latter demonstrates with a joke his wish to be one of the pack again: he grabs his crotch and says “Why then is my pump well flower’d”. With that line he is taken by all as part of the group once again. To reaffirm their homosocial bonds ritualistically, while saying the lines “Now are thou sociable, now are thou Romeo; now are thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature”, Mercutio chases Romeo towards the beach, where they tumble together and continue to wrestle on the sand until the appearance of the Nurse.

The Nurse’s presence actually pulls Romeo away from the group again. He promptly disengages from Mercutio’s embrace and stands up as soon as he notices her arrival. A humorous Mercutio

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then taunts the Nurse along with the others (“A bawd, a bawd, a bawd!”), but a change occurs when he realizes Romeo is seriously intent on leaving the pack. Mercutio’s face assumes a disquieted expression, which is reinforced by the soundtrack. Just as Romeo is about to leave with the Nurse, completely ignoring the callings of Mercutio and his friends, the latter raises his pistol and shoots into the air, thus making everyone stop stand still and focus on him. Mercutio then demands of Romeo if the latter will join them afterwards. The music in the scene also comes to an abrupt end as soon as the gun goes off, adding to the dramatic tension. The close-up on Mercutio’s face after Romeo’s response, emphasizing a shift from a smile to a stern look, seems to show a feeling of betrayal and hurt as he is left behind.

Whereas both productions focus on the strong bonds of homosocial desire that permeate the play, the extent to which each emphasizes Mercutio’s queerness in the process is nevertheless somewhat different. It is possible to conclude that this difference, in a sense, has to do with the different contexts in which both productions were made and how they represent rebellion as well as social belonging. Seeing that the youth culture in the sixties incorporated the ideal of generational and sexual revolution, the Mercutio of the 1968 production is seen by the others in the pack not just as a leader, but as a role model, as the embodiment of defiance against the social order or the status quo embodied by the older generation.

The potential queerness related to the character is, thus, not necessarily or strictly associated with his relationship with Romeo, but with the entire social stratum, exemplified by the fact that Mercutio can interact and joke around just as well with Benvolio, a member of his group, or with Tybalt, allegedly a rival. In Zeffirelli’s production, Mercutio establishes bonds of homosocial desire with all those around him, reinforcing the sense of a community united by those very bonds.

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Luhrmann's 1996 production, on the other hand, is catered to a generation that was coming of age in the nineties, just recovering from the materialistic concerns and cynicism of the yuppie eighties in a post-AIDS-epidemic world. The sharp cultural contrast between the contexts of the two films can be illustrated by the simple fact that if the sixties can be thought of by means of the innocent rebellion of the Beatles—so much so that Romeo's hair in Zeffirelli's film resembles the style used by the Liverpool band—the personality that marked the nineties was the tragic figure of Kurt Cobain.

Very much in tune with this context, Luhrmann's production does not shy away from portraying a queer(ed) Mercutio. As a drag queen whose drugs could be cynically interpreted as being the real catalyst for "true" love, Luhrmann's Mercutio is not just rebellious, he is the emblem of non-normativity itself. In that production, the character of Mercutio queers gender, queers expectations of masculinity and femininity, queers expectations of race, and, in a sense, queers love, or the ideal of romantic love. If Mercutio was always already defiant of love in his lines, in Luhrmann's production he is the embodiment of this defiance. In this sense, one can say that queerness in Zeffirelli's Mercutio is seen in his role as a leader and reinforcer of the bonds of homosocial desire within his group, whereas Luhrmann's Mercutio is much more associated with his own individual non-normative traits, such as toying with the idea of femininity and masculinity at will, and with the nature of his relationship with Romeo.

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