

# The function of the dreamscape in mercutio's queen mab monologue

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In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare creates tension between Romeo and Mercutio's diverging perceptions of dreams. In an intricately crafted and emotional monologue, Mercutio counters Romeo's idealistic Petrarchan belief in the power of premonition with his own skeptic view (1. 4. 53-121).

Mercutio wittily coins the legend of Queen Mab, a tiny fairy-like creature that rules the land of dreams to do so. Through fanciful metaphor and rhythmic meter, Mercutio likens Romeo's fancies to the ridiculousness of a fairy tale. However, his tone drastically changes from light hearted jest to bitter rant over the course of delivery. What initially begins as an attempt to dissuade Romeo's pining over Rosaline, then object of his affection, becomes a much darker probe into the psyche of its speaker and the psyche of the play at large. Queen Mab rules over the land of dream and can stand as a metaphor for both love and nightmares.

The function of the dreamscape monologue is to serve as a mirror for the events of the play, and to foreshadow what is to come. It brings to light the sexual, homoerotic and violent desires suppressed by Verona. Though his argument begins as a dismissal of dreams as products of desire, Mercutio's speech eerily functions as a damning premonition. His light-hearted speech unintentionally functions as a twisted mirror of the structure, setting and themes of the play and elucidates its events. In fulfilling this role, Mercutio's monologues disprove his own skepticism and instead unwittingly lends credence to Romeo's assertion of the power of dreams to expand on current events and predict future ones. *Romeo and Juliet* develops its drama by exacerbating tensions between opposing forces. Much of the tension between Romeo and Mercutio stems from their opposing attitudes towards

dreams, love and customs. Shakespeare presents Mercutio as Romeo's unlikely foil. Whereas Romeo is sensible and upstanding on the surface, he is revealed as naïve and arguably foolish as the play progresses. Mercutio, on the other hand, is presented as volatile and facetious. Instead, his characterization reveals him to be insightful; he displays surprising foresight in his monologue. Romeo is a class Petrarchan lover—for him to be in a state of despair and longing is unexceptional. The courtly lover espouses a life of suffering that separates him from his object of desire. Romeo's conception of love prescribes to this notion; that love is extended courtship riddled with turmoil and suffering.

In his relationship with Rosaline, not only is he willing to undergo such trial, but believes himself compelled to do so. If love is true, it is marred with necessary complications, claims he, and so Romeo endures its trials. Mercutio dismisses this helplessness as ridiculous. He undermines its gravity with lewd humor and innuendos. He delivers the monologue as encouragement for Romeo to attend the Capulet party and disregard his uneasy dream. In a stroke of dramatic irony, it is Mercutio, denier of the existence of fate and the power of premonition, who orchestrates the realization of Romeo's misgiving. Additionally, while his speech seeks to dissuade Romeo from the seduction of Mab's world, Mercutio himself becomes so invested in it that he is reduced to raving. He is visibly distressed by the description of the world he describes. In a dramatic inversion, Romeo is the one who is unaffected by Mercutio's speech, which he dissolves and dismisses. Mercutio's tale initially delights the Montagues

and eventually horrifies them. The Queen's initially fantastical world eventually becomes a hag's nightmarish sphere. This juxtaposition sets up the similarity of the two worlds and serves as a forewarning for the story unfolding in Verona. Mercutio's monologue explores the conflict between the two philosophies through the construction of a dreamscape. The unspoken conflicts of the play must be understood in a dream world free from the restrictions in place in stifling Verona. Over the course of the monologue, however, the restrictions of Verona creep into Mercutio's speech. It becomes less fantastical and more misogynistic, violent, and bitter. The effect shifts from entertaining to horrifying. This degenerative structure of the monologue mirrors the play's own structure.

Acts one and two are comedic and merry: they feature the discovery of exciting true love between unlikely people, easy jesting of Romeo and friends, and the amusing wit of Juliet as she comes into her own. When Mercutio is killed in Act three's first scene, however, the tone of the play shifts dramatically. It becomes the tragedy it had ominously promised to be in its opening sonnet (prologue). Mercutio's monologue, and the creatures and land it details, mimic the tonal transition of the play. Initial descriptions of miniature Mab as "no bigger than an agate-stone" delight the Montagues. Mercutio entertains with diminutive images of "wings of grasshoppers," "smallest spider's web[s]" and "empty hazelnut[s]", which comprise Mab's carriage and assist her distribution of dreams of love. However, as his speech develops, it becomes more frenzied: Mab "gallops night by night" on her warlike chariot, producing nightmares. She is no longer minute: Mab now

is large enough to “ driveth o’er a soldier’s neck” (1. 4. 87) and exact revenge on unvirtuous maidens. Mab’s world has dissolved from a land of dreams to a decrepit nightmare. The “ hag” (CITE) deals now only in death, sex and destruction. Mercutio cites desire as the source of these forces in the dream world. The true love that Romeo and Juliet find in each other also eventually dissolves into misery and violence by its conclusion. The desire that spurs the deaths of their kin and friends ultimately ends in their tragic double suicide.

This mirrors cute and fantastical Queen Mab’s reduction to an evil force terrorizing a hellscape. What is Queen Mab’s function? Mab is warlike. Her carriage is a “ chariot”, upon which she gallops night by night, marching over the bodies of various men, giving dreams of love to lovers but also spreading visions of death, violence and corruption (1. 4. 75-110). Soldiers are made to dream of “ cutting foreign throats” and dream of “ breaches, ambuscadoes... and blades” (1. 4. 89). The alliteration of the ‘ b’ sound mimics the violent marching movement of Mab, and angrily punctuates Mercutio’s point. “ This is that very Mab” asserts Mercutio, the meter emphasizing his distaste with the Queen. The deictic markers “ this”, “ that”, and “ there” (1. 4. 90-93) emphasize Mab’s physicality by identifying her within space. Her physicality and that of dreamers’ is emphasized. Mab possess a physical form. This grows from minute to large as the monologue develops, emphasizing the importance of her corporal presence. Tis form travels over specific body parts of the dreamers, such as lawyers’ fingers or ladies’ lips. Mercutio emphasizes a correlation between the mental desires of the dreamers and

where those desires originate and manifest. By establishing the physical coordinates of Mab's movement, in relation with the desires of human dreamers, and through her bodily contact with those she effects, we are driven to root this fanciful description of the Queen in physical reality. The dreamscape mingles with the real world in Verona. Mercutio presents Mab as "the fairies' midwife", a creature who delivers dreams to sleeping men based on their chief desires. For the lawyer, she produces images of money. For the priest, images of authority and corruption. For the soldier, images of bloodshed and conquest. For the lover, images of love and sex. Through these examples, Mercutio asserts that our dreams are simply wish fulfillment. This fulfillment too is hollow; the dreamscape is hardly the fantastical delight it appears to be. Mab is conflated with images of bugs and parasites. Her carriage is grotesquely constructed from "wings of grasshopper", "spider's web", and "cricket's bone" (1. 4. 64-68).

Additionally, it is likened to a "grey-coated gnat" or a "round little worm", parasites that cause sickness and infection. Dreams, especially those of love, are an infection or illness—Mercutio asserts this with disgusting images of parasites and violence. Mab is representative for all consuming love and desire. Mercutio is repulsed by her; while his monologue is additionally deeply suspicious of dreams of corruption and violence, it is primarily resentful of Petrarchan love. For much of the lengthy monologue, Mercutio cynically dissects love, its consummation and its motivation. The grotesque description of Mab's physical form is in line with Mercutio's distaste for women as sexual beings. Both 'Queen' and 'Mab' were known to

Elizabethan audiences to mean whore. Mab, who denotes love, is diminutive. This description likens Romeo's love for Rosaline as small and inconsequential. Love is a fancy that lives in the land of dream, with other fancies like fairies, Mercutio implies. As Mercutio's fury rises, his tirade is interrupted. For Mercutio, love, just as the rant it induced, can be dissolved easily. Additionally, love is characterized as parasitic and even violent. The onus of this is placed on women; Mercutio's misogynistic outburst is critical of women's agency and reduces them to sexual objects. Even the merriest parts of his speech are littered with crude sexual innuendos—such as when “round little worms” are “prick'd”. Round little worms were common references to sexually transmitted diseases, and the word “prick'd” is intentionally provocative. As the speech progresses, the imagery becomes explicitly violent and sexual, evoking disgust. Mab enacts revenge on maids that have “tainted” their breaths with sweetmeats” or oral sex. This depiction of ‘love’ is overtly sexual and dismissive of Petrarchan conceptions.

These maids in love, represented by Mab, are “foul [and] sluttish”. Love is seen as a mental illness that “gallops...through lovers' brain” (1. 4. 75), or as self-deception. Love masks the repressed lust that Verona forbids. Licentious images are invoked: “maids lie” or are “pressed” onto their backs. Not only is this image misogynistic and dismissive of women as sexually perverse, but also the word “press” reinforces the physicality of Mab, who forces girls to have sex. This sexual desire, and its expression as love, is ruinous. Mab, representative of love, propagates disease and

infection in the aftermath of sex. Similarly, Romeo and Juliet's love leads to various deaths. Their secretive marriage and its implied consummation prevent Romeo from fighting Tybalt. Mercutio engages him instead and dies, an indirect victim of their consummation. If Verona is a place of restriction, Mercutio attempts to use the dreamscape as its liberated counterpart. It explores the sexuality of women and the corrupt or grotesque, taboo topics in stifling Verona. What motivates Mercutio's speech? Mercutio is Romeo's foil, and his rebuttal of Romeo's idealism is an apt example of his function in that capacity. However, his feeling seems to extend beyond this relationship. Shakespeare's Verona is strictly heteronormative and yet, at this point in the play, we have not witnessed the staging of heterosexual relations.

Certainly, Juliet is sexualized for the pleasure of men from the first scene of the play, but this sexuality is only implied. We never see Paris directly court her. Similarly, while Romeo has been pining for Rosaline, her vow of chastity has effectively blocked any possibility of sexual interaction. Further still, Rosaline does not have a physical stage presence. Conversely, up to this point in the play, we have witnessed direct homoerotic interaction. The ultra-macho culture of Verona bolsters such interaction; Romeo is surrounded by sexually charged young men, who express their hypermasculinity through sexual punning and physical interaction in the presence of and with each other. The scene depicting the Queen Mab monologue features potential homoerotic tension between Romeo and Mercutio. Mercutio's relationship with Romeo cannot be overtly homosexual. Mercutio references a "bosom" and "dew down south" (1. 4. 108-110) in response to Romeo's dismissal of



his speech, terms with sexual connotations. However, Romeo dismisses his friend's monologue as "nothing", and further still is oblivious to its homoerotic undertones. Indeed, Mercutio's entire speech could be read as an admission of love for his friend. Mercutio is frustrated with Romeo's preoccupation with love.

This frustration could arguably be born of fraternity or of homoerotic jealousy. The heterosexual love espoused by Verona thwarts the masculinity of the man involved. It also thwarts homosexuality which is why Mercutio may disprove of his friend's heterosexual love. His condemnation of women can be explained thusly. Dreams have power for premonition and for exposing that which cannot be seen, such as lust or love, but they submit to the restrictions of reality. In the society of Verona, sexuality is imposed as a social construct that binds all its citizens.

As Mercutio grows more distraught, the fancy of his speech disintegrates. He abandons talk of fairies and minute creatures. Verona reasserts itself and brings its taboos with it. By the end of Mercutio's speech, reality has crept back into Mab's world and imposes restrictions on Mercutio's discussion of love, desire, and sexuality. Mercutio is forced to talk, if disdainfully, of heterosexual relationships. Biological images of reproduction reinforce heteronormative reality. These biological images in the dream world further still connects the two worlds. In a masterstroke of tragic irony, Mercutio's attempt to ridicule Romeo's dream fails.

In fact, it achieves exactly the opposite of its intention: not only does it set up the events that lead to Romeo's foreshadowed doom, but in doing so it proves Romeo's point. Dreams absolutely preempt events in Romeo and Juliet. They are mesmerizing: Mercutio, who scorn their appeal, becomes so involved in his dream world that he must be cut off forcibly. Mercutio's dreamscape exposes the underbelly of Verona and exposes the taboo. The misogyny, sexuality, corruption, bloodlust and heterosexual trappings of the society creep into Mercutio's dream world. At its conclusion, there is two-fold denial: Mercutio, who astutely predicts what is to come, claims he speaks only of "vain fantasy" (1. 4. 124). Romeo fails to understand both the clarity of Mercutio's "nothing" and his desire.