

Comparing mercutio character's portrayal in two film adaptations

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Many film adaptations of William Shakespeare's classic tragedy of "star-crossed lovers" have been made, both in the original setting and more modern ones (Shakespeare Prologue. 6). Two movies that exemplify this are Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1997). Even though the plot and script are identical, each director's vision for his film produces an individual, unique movie. For example, the events of Act 3, Scene 1, of the play are included in both films, but how they are presented contrast greatly. In this scene Romeo's friend, Mercutio, crosses paths with Tybalt, Juliet's cousin (Shakespeare 3. 1. 1-88). A fight ensues, resulting in Mercutio's death (Shakespeare 3. 1. 89-127). A vengeful Romeo then seeks out Tybalt and kills him (Shakespeare 3. 1. 128-146). Zeffirelli portrays Mercutio as easygoing and playful, whereas Luhrmann's Mercutio is short-tempered and violent.

Zeffirelli took a traditional approach to his adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. His film is set in 14th century Verona, Italy, the original setting of the play. In the beginning of the scene, Mercutio is taking a stroll with Benvolio, another friend of Romeo. Mercutio, playfully angry, declares loudly how Benvolio picks fights with everyone: "Thou art like one of those fellows that, when he enters the confines of a tavern, claps me his sword upon the table and says 'God send me no need of thee!' and by the operation of the second cup draws him on the drawer, when indeed there is no need" (Shakespeare 3. 1. 5-10). Mercutio accuses Benvolio of being quick to fight with others, even when there is no reason to. This is ironic, because Mercutio is the one who more accurately fits this description. The two come across a small fountain, and Mercutio proceeds to jump in to cool off from the hot weather.

Tybalt then enters onto the scene with several others and approaches Mercutio, who is still in the fountain acting facetious (Zeffirelli). They banter jokingly, but some tension is created when Tybalt grabs his sword and holds it at his side. Mercutio counters this by taking his own sword out of the water and pointing it at Tybalt. Romeo appears bounding happily towards them, as he has just come from his wedding to Juliet. Tybalt challenges him, but Romeo refuses to draw his sword, instead taking Tybalt's hand in his and shaking it earnestly. Mercutio, appalled at Romeo's passivity, instigates a sword fight with Tybalt. The two seem to be fighting playfully, without ill intent. Still, Romeo attempts to intercept the fight, standing between them and holding back Mercutio. Tybalt stabs Mercutio under Romeo's arm and is surprised to see blood on the end of his sword when he pulls back. He appears concerned, but is quickly pulled away from the scene by his friends. Mercutio acts as if he was hardly wounded. "What, art thou hurt?" Benvolio asks (Shakespeare 3. 1. 97). Mercutio replies, "Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch" (Shakespeare 3. 1. 98). Mercutio, perhaps hoping his wound isn't very serious, plays it off as nothing more than a scratch. However, as the scene progresses, he becomes more aware of his imminent death. The others believe what he says and laugh as he curses the Capulets and the Montagues. He whispers to Romeo privately that he was stabbed when Romeo came between them and asks why he did so. "I thought all for the best," Romeo responds (Shakespeare 3. 1. 111). Romeo, thinking only of preventing a tragedy, inadvertently causes one. Mercutio continues to shout more curses on the two houses, resentful of the fact that their feud has essentially killed him. It is only after he finally collapses that the others

consider something is wrong. Romeo removes the cloth covering the gash in Mercutio's chest, and reveals that he has died from Tybalt's blow. Romeo runs, yelling, after Tybalt and starts another sword fight, this time resulting in Tybalt's death.

Luhrmann takes a different approach to this scene. His film is set in 1990s Los Angeles, which is referred to as "Verona Beach." This is drastically different from Zeffirelli's conventional setting. In the beginning of the scene of Luhrmann's movie, Mercutio is seen wading in the ocean, the dilapidated stage on the beach in the background. Because this film is set in modern times, instead of a sword, he carries a gun, which he shoots a few times into the water. Later, he joins Benvolio on the beach, and they joke with each other, playing nonchalantly with their loaded guns.

A dark car pulls up near them, and Tybalt, clad in black, steps out with this followers (Luhrmann). Tybalt addresses Mercutio calmly. They joke back and forth, but with an underlying hostility. Their words alone are not threatening, but each man's tone hints at his true intent. "Mercutio, thou consortest with Romeo," Tybalt states, referring to the fact that Mercutio is friendly with Romeo (Shakespeare 3. 1. 47). Mercutio responds, enraged, "Consort? What, dost thou make us minstrels" (Shakespeare 3. 1. 48)? Mercutio misunderstands Tybalt and is offended by his apparent insult. Mercutio reveals his gun, when Romeo arrives. Tybalt prepares for a gun fight, but Romeo insists he will not participate. Confused, Tybalt pushes Romeo to the ground and kicks him repeatedly, attempting to provoke him. Romeo still refuses, though, remaining peaceful. "O calm, dishonorable, vile

submission!" Mercutio hisses under his breath, just as baffled by Romeo's surrender as Tybalt (Shakespeare 3. 1. 76). Mercutio attacks Tybalt and throws him onto a pane of glass, shattering it. Romeo tries to terminate the fight by standing between them. Tybalt, crawling to his feet, grabs a shard of glass beneath him and thrusts it into Mercutio's side. After seeing what he has done, Tybalt hesitantly leaves, driving away in his car. Mercutio denies that his injury is great, but turns away from the others to examine it. Upon observing the ghastly tear in his abdomen, he looks up to the sky gravely and closes his eyes, quietly acknowledging his grim future. He turns back to the others, covering his wound, and screams, "A plague o' both your houses" (Shakespeare 3. 1. 113)! Thunder roars as he says this, and his voice echoes. These two sound effects heighten the severity of the situation and emphasize Mercutio's anger. The others around him now understand that Mercutio is serious. The weather becomes increasingly tempestuous as Mercutio comes closer to death. He falls onto the sand and dies, covered in blood. Romeo wails over Mercutio's dead body, getting himself bloody. He drives after Tybalt with tears running down his face and causes Tybalt's car to overturn. When Tybalt crawls out, Romeo shoots him several times, still crying. Tybalt falls back into a fountain, dead. The positioning of his outstretched arms in the water mimic the statue of Jesus above him.

Franco Zeffirelli's version of Act 3, Scene 1, of Romeo and Juliet is a more traditional one that follows the original play very closely. Meanwhile, Baz Luhrmann modernizes all the elements of the scene but the script. Zeffirelli's characters battle with swords and flee on foot, whereas Luhrmann's employ

guns and cars. Given the same material, these two directors created two very different products, particularly their portrayals of Mercutio. Zeffirelli's Mercutio remains quite friendly with Tybalt, up until he is stabbed fatally. Luhrmann's Mercutio, on the other hand, is short-tempered and eager for a fight. Thus, Mercutio's character as presented in Romeo and Juliet can be interpreted in more than one way, as these two movies illustrate.