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William Shakespeare's "Star-Crossed Lovers" in Hollywood: Love, Youth, and Sexuality in Baz Luhrmann's and Franco Zeffirelli's Film Adaptations of Romeo and Juliet

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Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting in Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*.
Image location: http://content7.flixster.com/photo/10/20/81/10208193_gal.jpg

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William Shakespeare's "Star-Crossed Lovers" in Hollywood:
Love, Youth, and Sexuality in Baz Luhrmann's and Franco Zeffirelli's Film
Adaptations of Romeo and Juliet

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Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*.
Image location: http://www.wildsoundfilmmakingfeedbackevents.com/images/leonardo_dicaprio_claire_danes.jpg

Abstract

Modern pop culture mediums such as songs, books, and films teem with references to William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as an iconic representation of true heterosexual love. This thesis aims to delve more deeply into the issues of love and sexuality in the play and explore its subtle underlying themes of homoeroticism and problematic heterosexuality through an analysis of the two major film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* from the latter twentieth-century: Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* and Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. Love and sexuality in these films will be explored by first analyzing the inherent problem posed by the presence of Rosaline, who calls into question the legitimacy of the idea of true love with regards to Romeo's feelings for Juliet. The next situation that complicates love and sexuality is Juliet's extreme youth; Shakespeare significantly and deliberately lowers her age from the source texts to just shy of fourteen years. After establishing the problems that Rosaline's character and Juliet's youth pose to a reading of *Romeo and Juliet* as a story of true heterosexual love, the focus shifts to the homoeroticism evidenced in the relationship between Luhrmann's Mercutio and Romeo. I argue that Luhrmann transforms the play's subtle evidence of homoeroticism into a blatant and crucial type of love between Mercutio and Romeo that is in competition with compulsory heterosexuality. By using Zeffirelli's film to compare and contrast critical scenes of the play, one can come to the understanding that Luhrmann creates a world of blurred sexual desires and gender roles that challenge views of *Romeo and Juliet* as emblematic of heterosexual love alone.

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Introduction

With the cultural relevance of the theater for mass audiences fading in the twentieth century, William Shakespeare's plays did what they have always done better than arguably any other literary work: they adapted. As critic Stephen Greenblatt remarks, "over the years, accommodations have been devised to make liking Shakespeare easier for everyone," and in the twentieth century this meant that "Shakespeare moved effortlessly to Hollywood and the soundstages of the BBC" (Greenblatt 1). This transition opened up new realms of possibility in adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, as film offers unprecedented visual, auditory, and artistic liberties to its directors.

In 1996, Australian director Baz Luhrmann took advantage of these possibilities and released a production called *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* that quite simply "angered critics because it delighted audiences" (Matthews qtd. in Guenther 17). Set in a dilapidated postmodern version of Verona that was actually filmed in Mexico City, Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* is packed with such shocking offenses as Hawaiian shirts, rock music, bejeweled pistols, and a cross-dressing Mercutio. Luhrmann's film adaptation of this play seemingly stands in stark contrast to its major predecessor, Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*, which adopted a more traditional approach to the play that included Elizabethan costumes and swordfights rather than Luhrmann's Hawaiian shirts and gunplay. However, despite their superficial differences, these films share a common desire to retell the classic tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* in ways designed to "make liking Shakespeare easier" for its modern audiences. It is undoubtedly a difficult undertaking to create a balance between making it easier for modern audiences to "like" Shakespeare and maintaining the complexity and beauty of the original play. In the process of adapting this complex play for the big screen, Zeffirelli and Luhrmann complicate, exaggerate,

and sometimes arguably overlook key issues in Shakespeare's text in order to create their own unique interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*.

It is important to consider the cultural and generational contexts of each of these film adaptations when attempting to bring them into conversation with one another. For instance, although Zeffirelli's 1968 film is now frequently revered as the traditional or accurate adaptation of the play, it was revolutionary in its own time and received its own fair share of negative criticism. Pauline Kael's 1968 review of Zeffirelli's film published in *The New Yorker* loathingly criticizes the film for everything from the cutting of the script to Zeffirelli's shoddy camerawork. However, Kael's biggest complaint was the casting of two young teenagers as Romeo and Juliet, which was a dramatic shift from the typical casting of older adults in the roles. Kael ultimately concludes that "pictures like these are not mediocrities (that's the best thing to be said for them); they're awful" (Kael 210-212). Zeffirelli's use of two young teenage actors for the main roles blazed the trail for subsequent films and adaptations to also use young actors, and despite criticism in 1968, it is now the "norm" to use young actors today.

Just as Zeffirelli's film initially suffered harsh criticism, Luhrmann's film has drawn heated words of condemnation and dismissal from critics. Donald Lyons, for instance, writes, "what Luhrmann has accomplished... is to define Shakespeare down to the tastes of today's youth culture, a culture so corrosive that it dissolves anything it comes into contact with. How innocuous, by comparison, seems Franco Zeffirelli's mildly hippiefied *Romeo and Juliet* from 1968!" (Lyons 58). Lyons takes a shot at the youth culture of 1996 and Luhrmann's film all in one breath, claiming that by making *Romeo and Juliet* appeal to the "corrosive" youth culture of 1996, he has allowed the film to "dissolve" into an equally corroded travesty. This criticism is ironically similar to Kael's criticism of Zeffirelli's film—which, coincidentally, Lyons upholds

as the harmless version of the play—in its criticism of youth. Yet Kael disparagingly refers to Zeffirelli's desire to “attract teen-agers,” claiming that the actors “seem dear little children playing at the director's notion of teen-age sex hunger, and despite the words, they look and move like inarticulate modern kids in the latest movie cycle” (Kael 209). Here Kael criticizes the “inarticulate modern kids” of 1968, just as Lyons criticizes 1996 youth culture by calling it “corrosive.” The common theme between initial criticisms of each film is the sense of superiority that older generations tend to feel over the “youth culture” of their time; the fact that both Zeffirelli and Luhrmann aimed to appeal to the youth enraged older generations who despised their time's youth culture.

By analyzing the rich symbolism and imagery of Luhrmann's and Zeffirelli's film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, this project aims to explore the intricacies of love, youth, and sexuality in Shakespeare's infamous play. There are many problems that interfere with the common reading of *Romeo and Juliet* as emblematic of “true love” and compulsory heterosexuality, such as the inclusion of the absent Rosaline in the story's plot. Rosaline is Romeo's first love, and his feelings for her certainly seem sincere as he morosely battles the depression of being rejected by her; yet Romeo completely disregards this love as soon as he sets eyes upon Juliet. This suggests that Romeo's love may be of a certain variable and fickle nature. In addition, Juliet's extreme youth and inexperience complicates the understanding of her as a sexually mature woman who is capable of participating in a relationship of this gravity. Zeffirelli's attention to the dangers of young love, and young motherhood in particular, are especially intriguing in terms of understanding why Shakespeare chose to deliberately lower Juliet's age.

The most fascinating aspect of love and sexuality, however, is evidenced in Luhrmann's

brilliant representation of the homoerotic relationship between Mercutio and Romeo. This relationship is most evident in Luhrmann's interpretation of Act III, Scene I, during which Tybalt fatally wounds Mercutio. In addition to representing the tragic turning point of the play, this scene also embodies the culmination of the homoerotic love between Mercutio and Romeo, and is consequently the most critical scene in Luhrmann's film. The respective interpretations of Mercutio's death will be closely analyzed in both Zeffirelli's and Luhrmann's film adaptations of the play in order to come to an understanding of the significance of Luhrmann's deviations in this scene from both the text and Zeffirelli's film precedent. Most importantly, Luhrmann's Mercutio sacrifices his own life in order to save Romeo's, a seemingly small change from the text and Zeffirelli's film that has an absolutely enormous impact on an understanding of the play's homoeroticism.

Love and sexuality in *Romeo and Juliet* and its film adaptations can be understood as a complicated mixture of heterosexual and homosexual love that transcends sex and gender boundaries. This is best evidenced through Shakespeare's problematic inclusion of Rosaline, his emphasis on Juliet's youth, and through Luhrmann's blatant interpretation of Mercutio as representative of homoerotic love. Ultimately, one can come to an understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* not as the tragic story of compulsory heterosexual love, but rather as a complicated amalgamation of competing homoerotic and heterosexual love as evidenced by Romeo's relationships with Rosaline, Juliet, and Mercutio.

Chapter 1:

The Problem of Rosaline

Shakespeare's inclusion of Rosaline in the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* has significant implications for the dynamics of Romeo's relationships with women. Rosaline's inclusion in the play is puzzling, for she has no lines and arguably is never even present on the stage, yet Shakespeare pointedly includes her as an important character in the development of the plot. The question, then, is what exactly Rosaline's role in *Romeo and Juliet* is, given her overall absence from the actual events of the play. Considering the evidence for homoeroticism elsewhere in the play, it seems that Rosaline functions primarily to call into question the legitimacy of Romeo's heterosexual love for first Rosaline and later Juliet.

Modern popular culture allusions to *Romeo and Juliet* often depict the romance between Romeo and Juliet as the epitome of human heterosexual love, a notion that can be largely discounted through a close analysis of the text. In her discussion of how *Romeo and Juliet* has come to represent idealized love, critic Dymphna C. Callaghan quotes Joseph Porter in stating that "*Romeo and Juliet* 'has become far more canonical a story of heterosexual love than it was when it came to Shakespeare's hand'" (Callaghan 61). Callaghan cites examples to complicate readings of the play as representing idealized love, such as the fact "that in its Elizabeth production," *Romeo and Juliet* were not played by an actor and an actress but rather by two male actors, one of whom was "suitably feminine-featured" while the actor playing Romeo was simply a "slightly more rugged youth" (61). The homoeroticism evidenced in this situation is amplified by Shakespeare's "profoundly homoerotic Mercutio" (61), whose homoerotic tendencies are highlighted and exaggerated in Luhrmann's film adaptation. In addition to the play's homoerotic undertones, the idea of *Romeo and Juliet* as a story of true love is further

complicated by Shakespeare's inclusion of Romeo's love for Rosaline and Romeo's consistently insincere Petrarchan discourse.

In the text of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare repeatedly and significantly alludes to the inconstant and questionable nature of Romeo's love. Several of the play's characters, including Juliet herself, overtly express their concerns about the legitimacy of Romeo's feelings for the young Capulet beauty. The first major problem that brings Romeo's "love" for Juliet into question comes in the form of his extreme passion for Rosaline at the play's beginning, followed by his disturbingly sudden abandonment of those feelings upon meeting Juliet. Shakespeare stresses Romeo's lovesick pining for Rosaline throughout Act I; for instance, Romeo's father bemoans his son's mysterious melancholy, the cause of which as of yet undetermined: "Away from light steals home my heavy son, / And private in his chamber pens himself, / Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out, / And makes himself an artificial night" (Shakespeare 1.1.130-33). Romeo exhibits such extreme signs of depression as isolating himself from others and creating for himself "an artificial night." Romeo's family is so concerned for his well being that his cousin Benvolio persistently attempts to unearth the source of his troubles; Romeo eventually admits that his love for the unattainable Rosaline is the cause of his grief. Benvolio learns that Rosaline "hath sworn that she will still live chaste" (1.2.210), a decision which Romeo laments because it "cuts [her] beauty off from all posterity" (1.2.213). In a dramatic statement typical of the young poet, Romeo states, "She hath forsworn to love, and in that vow / Do I live dead, that live to tell it now" (1.2.216-17). Here, Romeo states that Rosaline's refusal to love him causes him to "live dead," a profound and overdramatic statement that captures the gravity of his perceived love for Rosaline.

Romeo's love-induced depression is a cause of concern for his family, his friends, and

even Friar Laurence, who challenges Romeo's sudden change of heart when he wants to marry Juliet. As Romeo, Mercutio, and the rest of his Montague men head to the Capulet banquet, Romeo continues to melodramatically grieve over Rosaline's denied love with comments such as, "I have a soul of lead / So stakes me to the ground I cannot move," and "under love's heavy burden do I sink" (1.4.15-16, 23). Yet, despite this severe depression caused by his deep love for Rosaline, Romeo completely dismisses these feelings with a simple glance upon Juliet: "Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight, / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night" (1.5.49-50). After spending the evening wooing Juliet on her balcony, Romeo's inconstant love is further evidenced when Friar Laurence asks him, "Wast thou with Rosaline?" to which Romeo responds, "With Rosaline, my ghostly father? No, / I have forgot that name and that name's woe" (2.2.44-46), showing that Romeo can "love" to the point of severe depression and then completely forget "that name" simply by seeing another beautiful girl.

Jonathan Goldberg argues that Romeo replaces Rosaline with Juliet, a substitution that both Benvolio and Mercutio seem to encourage in their efforts to help Romeo overcome his depression. Goldberg writes that Romeo's ability to move on from Rosaline is "not so much a forgetting as a replacing, a substitution. Seen in that light, Juliet as replacement object is inserted within a seriality rather than as the locus of uniqueness and singularity" (Goldberg 85). This assertion indicates that Juliet's substitution for Rosaline marks her not as a unique and special love interest for Romeo, but rather one in a series of women presumably beginning with Rosaline. Although this argument is likely difficult to agree with for those who view Romeo and Juliet as sharing true love, Goldberg backs up his argument with almost irrefutable evidence, including the play's obsession with the interchangeability of names for objects. For instance, when Juliet learns that Romeo is a Montague, she famously ponders, "What's in a name? That

which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet” (2.1.85-86). Goldberg asks, “Is Juliet that rose, and, thereby, Rosaline renamed? What would the consequences be of thinking of her as the newest avatar of Rosaline in the play?” (Goldberg 85). These questions take on particular significance when considered with regards to Luhrmann’s depiction of different types of competing loves in his film.

In an argument somewhat similar to the idea of Romeo replacing Rosaline with Juliet, critic Robert O. Evans discusses the initial similarities between Romeo’s love for the two women. Evans writes, “At the start of the play it is quite clear that Romeo’s intentions towards Rosaline are what we would call dishonorable. Moreover, his attraction for Juliet was similar. Until she proposed marriage the essential difference between Juliet and Rosaline was simply that Juliet encouraged Romeo while Rosaline resisted him” (Evans 73). These “dishonorable” intentions towards Rosaline can easily be evidenced through Romeo’s complaint that Rosaline has sworn to “live chaste” (1.2.210). The driving force behind Romeo’s all-consuming depression is simply the fact that Rosaline refuses to engage in sexual relations with him and therefore rejects his love. Romeo appears to directly equate sexual access with love; for instance, Romeo bemoans the fact that Rosaline “hath sworn that she will still live chaste” (1.2.210), but in his mind, this also means that “she hath forsworn to love” (1.2.216). The interchangeability of “sex” and “love” in Romeo’s language complicates the validity and meaning of the word “love” when Romeo applies it not only to Rosaline, but also to Juliet. Evans even remarks that Romeo’s attraction to Juliet was similar to his attraction for Rosaline, which implies that his love for Juliet was based on the same sexual desire that he felt for Rosaline. Although Evans admits that Romeo’s initial love for Juliet is as questionable as his love for Rosaline, he repeatedly argues throughout his book that Romeo’s feelings for Juliet intensify after she proposes marriage to

him. Evans distinguishes between these two types of love by referring to Romeo's love for Rosaline as "unrequited love" and his feelings for Juliet as "grand passion" (26). Evans's comments on the issues presented by Romeo's love for Rosaline give recognition to a problem that can be all too easily ignored—not least of which because Rosaline is not physically present in the play. However, Evans's assessment of Romeo's feelings for Juliet as subsequently more legitimate than those for Rosaline can be debated, particularly when one considers the homoeroticism implied in the text and emphasized in Luhrmann's film adaptation of the play.

Friar Laurence similarly raises objections to Romeo's two cases of "love at first sight" when Romeo appeals to the Friar to marry him to Juliet. Friar Laurence responds: "Holy Saint Francis, what a change is here! / Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear, / So soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies / Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes" (2.2.65-68). Friar Laurence upbraids Romeo for his fickle love, astutely accusing Romeo of loving not with his heart, but with his eyes. This accusation is consistent with Romeo's declaration of "love" for Juliet simply upon seeing her ("Did my heart love till now?"). Romeo does not reserve his love for Juliet until he passes judgment upon her character, but rather "loves" her immediately, just as he "loved" Rosaline, and one should be wary that his love for Juliet is similarly fickle. Friar Laurence consents to marry Romeo and Juliet not because he believes their love is real, but because he hopes the marriage will end the hatred between the Capulets and Montagues: "For this alliance may so happy prove / To turn your households' rancor to pure love" (2.2.91-92).

Like many critics, Clifford Leech contends that the love between Romeo and Juliet is of an entirely different—and more legitimate—league than that of his love for Rosaline. Leech writes that "Romeo had been almost totally a figure of fun when he was giving voice to his love for Rosaline, and after meeting Juliet he is in a situation of some embarrassment when he goes to

tell the Friar of his new love and of his wish for a secret marriage” (Leech 11). Leech here asserts that Romeo’s love for Rosaline was playful and fun rather than anything serious or real. He further describes the Friar’s shocked reaction to Romeo’s newest love, mentioning the “particularly ludicrous touch when the Friar claims to see on Romeo’s cheek a tear shed for Rosaline’s love and not yet washed off” (11). Despite Leech’s attention to the questionable nature of Romeo’s sudden shift in lovers through his discussion of Friar Laurence’s reaction, he still firmly contends, “even so, Shakespeare makes it plain that the new love is a thing of true moment” (11). This attitude tends to be the prevailing one among critics writing on *Romeo and Juliet*; they bypass the problem posed by Rosaline by reducing Romeo’s love for her to something “fun” that is certainly not “true love,” or even a “true moment.” The most important piece of evidence typically cited in support of this argument is that Romeo’s language changes to something more complex and real when he meets Juliet. Leech, for instance, argues that the realness of Romeo’s love for Juliet versus the “fun” of his love for Rosaline is, in part, “made evident...in the authority of language that the lovers [Romeo and Juliet] are sometimes allowed” (11).

Although Robert O. Evans does generally argue that Romeo’s love for Juliet represents a “grand passion” that is more real than his love for Rosaline, he also interestingly considers the “language” argument that Leech and many other critics frequently tend to invoke in their defense of Romeo’s love for Juliet:

As we might expect, some critics have noted that Romeo is here highly rhetorical and have claimed that this was his mood while he was in love with Rosaline. He changed and became poetic, they seem to think, after he met Juliet. But that is not the way the play develops. Actually Romeo is rhetorical throughout wherever there is a need for him to be,

and his powers seem to grow at least up to and through the balcony scene. (Evans 25)

In this passage, Evans makes an important distinction between rhetoric and poetry. In the first line, the “here” mentioned with regards to Romeo being “highly rhetorical” refers to one of Romeo’s famous passages during a lament of Rosaline’s rejection: “Here’s much to do with hate, but more to do with love. / Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate, / O anything of nothing first create; / O heavy lightness, serious vanity, / Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms, / Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health” (1.1.168-173). Although Evans continues to quote two more lines from this passage, the most important examples of rhetoric can be seen in these lines, particularly the last one. Evans remarks that here, Romeo utilizes a rhetorical device called “extended oxymoron” (22). Virtually every line in this passage is an oxymoron: “brawling love,” “loving hate,” “heavy lightness,” “misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms;” and then there are what Evans calls “schoolboy examples” of oxymora: “feather of lead,” “bright smoke,” “cold fire,” and “sick health” (22-23). For Evans, Shakespeare uses these extended rhetorical figures to “shed light on Romeo’s character” and to emphasize his intellectualism, which will “develop in two directions, as wit and lyricism” (23). Evans argues that only Juliet has a better command of wit than does Romeo (23), and maintains that Romeo and Juliet are “the wittiest people in an especially witty play” (14). However, as Evans argues in the block quotation above, Romeo does not exclusively use rhetoric for Rosaline and poetry for Juliet. Instead, Romeo’s use of rhetorical devices is evidenced throughout the play, and language itself is not the distinguishing feature between Romeo’s two loves. Instead, Evans offers a simple explanation for the difference: “The only positive explanation Shakespeare offers use to distinguish Romeo’s true passion for Juliet from his sensual attraction for Rosaline is that the former is requited” (24). For Evans, who makes a convincing argument for the similarity between Romeo’s initial

attractions to the two women, the sole difference between the two types of love is that Juliet returns Romeo's love while Rosaline does not. The difference, then, lies not in Romeo's own feelings, but in Rosaline's and Juliet's. Romeo loved Rosaline as much as he initially loved Juliet, but Rosaline's decision to reject this love prevented the relationship from ever turning into the "grand passion" that Romeo and Juliet share. Ultimately, the difference between Romeo's loves for Rosaline and Juliet lies not in Romeo's language or feelings, but in the decisions of the two women.

Romeo's language holds important clues to his construction of how love and relationships should function. In an interesting and convincing argument, critic Crystal Downing extensively examines the superficially Petrarchan nature of Romeo's language. Like Friar Laurence in the scene where Romeo requests to be married to Juliet, Juliet herself alludes to the possibility of Romeo's misguided love for her, which can be seen in a particular instance of his incessant Petrarchan discourse. During the balcony scene, as Romeo begins to swear his love for Juliet "by yonder blessed moon" that "tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops," Juliet quickly cuts him off, telling him: "O swear not by the moon, th'inconstant moon / That monthly changes in her circled orb, / Lest that thy love prove likewise variable" (2.1.149-153). I argue that the young, impressionable, and patriarchally-dominated thirteen year-old Juliet's feelings for Romeo are more sincere than his for her, a fear which she also seems to reflect in this passage ("lest that thy love prove likewise variable") as well as later in the play. Here, Juliet tires of Romeo's cliché, superficial romanticism, which Crystal Downing rightly describes as the Petrarchan discourse that shapes Romeo's understanding of love and language. When Juliet forestalls Romeo's attempts to swear by the moon, which would, in Juliet's mind, establish his love as something fickle, "variable," and "inconstant," Romeo asks, "What shall I swear by?" to which

Juliet responds, “swear by thy gracious self, / ...the god of my idolatry” (2.1.155-156). Downing notes that despite Juliet’s pleas for sincerity, Romeo still reverts back to his known mode of Petrarchan discourse: “Since Romeo’s subjectivity still seems to be entirely constituted by Petrarchan discourse, he starts again with ‘If my heart’s dear love—,’ at which point Juliet curtly cuts him off with ‘Well, do not swear’” (Downing 127). This unequal exchange of Juliet’s sharp sincerity with Romeo’s hollow discourse establishes the “love” in their relationship as inherently problematic.

Romeo’s insincere Petrarchan discourse can be seen as yet another element that contributes to the problem of Romeo’s love that the inclusion of Rosaline reveals at the beginning of the play. The problem of Romeo’s “love” for Rosaline is often downplayed or conveniently ignored in discussions and productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, likely because it so thoroughly complicates the popular idea that Romeo and Juliet represent the epitome of true love. In Zeffirelli’s film adaptation, for instance, Downing claims that the name “Rosaline” is completely eliminated from the script (127). According to Downing, this decision is not unprecedented; she cites two productions from the 1740s, in which “both Cibber and Garrick banished the name of Rosaline from their plays, establishing a century-long tradition which eviscerated the discursive strength of Juliet, since we no longer see Romeo’s passive employment of the same discourse to describe two ‘unique’ females” (127). Here, Downing implies that the banishment of “Rosaline” in these productions, as well as Zeffirelli’s, undermines Juliet’s agency by subverting Romeo’s troublesome use of the same Petrarchan techniques on two different women. Juliet’s perceptive frustrations with Romeo’s vows of love in the balcony scene are consequently diminished because the viewer is less aware of Romeo’s cliché discourse. Eliminating the problem of Rosaline thus also eliminates some of the problem

with Romeo's love, for it appears that his romantic, Petrarchan language is reserved only for Juliet.

As seen in Downing's discussion, the decision to eliminate the name "Rosaline" in *Romeo and Juliet* productions has significant implications for Juliet's agency, and as I argue, for the perceived validity of Romeo's love. Unfortunately, Downing is not entirely correct in her assertion that Zeffirelli completely "eliminated the name of Rosaline," as Friar Laurence and Romeo actually do explicitly state her name in the scene where Romeo requests that Friar Laurence marry him to Juliet. Significantly, however, Zeffirelli does almost completely cut the illuminating conversation between Romeo and Benvolio in Act I, scene ii during which Romeo reveals Rosaline as the cause of his grief. In Zeffirelli's film, the discussion of Romeo's love-induced depression effectively ends with Romeo's answer to Benvolio's query: "What sadness lengthens Romeo's hours?" to which Romeo responds, "Not having that which, having, makes them short" (1.1.156-7). Zeffirelli then cuts the entire rest of the conversation by quickly changing the topic. A group enters the scene carrying a man who was injured in the earlier riot between the Montagues and Capulets, and Romeo, frustrated with the ongoing violence between the houses, exits the scene.

Although Zeffirelli does not completely eliminate the name "Rosaline" from his production, his decision to cut the primary dialogue in which Romeo speaks of her is consistent with his overall portrayal of the young lovers' love for one another as real. Furthermore, ending the scene at this particular point creates a certain ambiguity as to what exactly Romeo does not have which makes his hours "short." The unsuspecting viewer who knows only that Romeo and Juliet is a love story may very well assume that in this scene, Romeo pines for the possibility of the unknown true love who awaits him—that is, Juliet. Diminishing the problematic role of

Rosaline consequently contributes to the representation of *Romeo and Juliet* as idealized heterosexual love, which, as Callaghan points out, is what the play has come to symbolize in modern times.

Chapter II:

The Implications of Juliet's Extreme Youth

Juliet's extreme youth and sexuality contributes to the complication of the idea that *Romeo and Juliet* is a play that is representative of idealized heterosexual love. Despite Juliet's youth, the complexity of her character arguably outstrips that of Romeo's even on a linguistic level, as discussed in the analysis of Romeo's "silly conventionality" evident in his incessantly Petrarchan discourse (Downing 127). One critic supports Juliet's importance in the play with her remark that "as critics look beyond [Juliet's] youth, they discover not a reticent virgin but a multifaceted character who transcends Romeo in maturity, complexity, insight, and rhetorical dexterity" (Brown 333). While Romeo at times almost robotically fits the role of the courtly lover (he is even dressed as a knight for the Capulet ball in Luhrmann's film adaptation of the play), Juliet embodies a much more complex character who is complicated by issues such as her extreme youth and patriarchal oppression. It is therefore quite accurate to assert, as critic Lindsey Scott does, that *Romeo and Juliet* "has always been, to some degree, about *Juliet*" (Daileader qtd. in Scott 138), and her complexities warrant an analysis of her representation in film adaptations of the play.

One of the most perplexing and even disturbing aspects of Juliet's character is that of her age. In comparison to his other plays, Shakespeare devotes an unusual amount of attention to Juliet's extreme youth; her age—just two weeks from fourteen years—is not only defined in the text, but is repeatedly and uniquely emphasized. For example, critic J. Karl Franson notes that "the tender age of Juliet Capulet provides the focus of the initial conversation between Lord Capulet and Count Paris" when Paris seeks Juliet's hand in marriage (Franson 244). When Paris asks, "But now, my lord: what say you to my suit?" (Shakespeare 1.2.6), Capulet responds, "My

child is yet a stranger in the world; / She hath not seen the change of fourteen years. / Let two more summers wither in their pride / Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride” (1.2.8-12). Here, Capulet clearly states that Juliet is too young for marriage, and indicates that it will be two more years before she will be mature enough for marriage. Paris continues to push the issue, arguing, “younger than she are happy mothers made” (1.2.13), to which Capulet responds, “and too soon marred are those so early made” (1.2.14), indicating that girls who are made mothers before their time are somehow damaged by the process. Capulet’s remark that girls who are made mothers young are “too soon marred” is given special significance when we learn that Capulet’s wife herself became a mother at Juliet’s age. As Lady Capulet tries to convince Juliet to be open to marriage despite her youth, she argues, “By my count / I was your mother much upon these years / That you are now a maid” (1.3.73-75). This comment marks Capulet’s wife as being still quite young herself, and presents an intriguing parallel between Juliet and her mother.

In his article on Juliet’s age, J. Karl Franson focuses on this idea that girls who marry early are “too soon marred” by dispelling the modern-day notion that Elizabethans married young. Because life expectancy in the Elizabethan era is commonly perceived as significantly lower than it is today, it may seem reasonable to assume that it was not at all unusual for a girl to marry (and consummate her marriage) at the age of thirteen or fourteen. However, as Franson points out, “the notion that Elizabethan couples married young has been challenged recently by social historians” (Franson 245). Franson remarks that “physical maturity developed later than it does today: girls matured at 14-15, boys at 16-18” (245), which means that Shakespeare’s almost fourteen-year-old Juliet would just be entering into puberty. Furthermore, youths under the age of fifteen were legally considered children, and although the earliest legal age for marriage was fourteen, “early teenage marriages were rare” (245). Franson further notes that “in the few cases”

of early teenage marriage on record, “the children were either not formally betrothed or not allowed to consummate their vows until much older” (245).

Franson also provides specific and compelling reasons why Elizabethan society shunned the practice of early teenage marriage and consummation. For instance, health manuals of the time, “as well as observations of married life,” concluded that “early marriage and its consummation permanently damaged a young woman’s health, impaired a young man’s physical and mental development, and produced sickly or stunted children” (245). Juliet’s father seems well aware of these dangers, as evidenced in his initial reluctance to allow his daughter to marry Paris for at least two more years, when she would be nearly sixteen years of age. Franson supports this idea when he states, “the general view was that motherhood before 16 was dangerous,” and he further identifies eighteen as “the earliest reasonable age for motherhood” and “20 and 30 the ideal ages for women and men, respectively, to marry” (246).

In context, then, Franson argues “that Capulet would offer his daughter to Paris despite her ‘extreme youth,’ thus forcing Juliet to marry Romeo secretly, must have been appalling to an Elizabethan” (246). This leads to the question of why Shakespeare chose to emphasize Juliet’s age, particularly when earlier versions of the story, such as those written by Arthur Brooke and Bandello, depicted Juliet as sixteen and eighteen, respectively (244). Shakespeare did more than just reiterate the issue of Juliet’s age throughout the play; he even altered it from the source texts to deliberately make her significantly younger. On the subject of Shakespeare’s deliberate lowering of Juliet’s age, critic Robert O. Evans rejects the argument that Shakespeare “read Bro[o]ke carelessly, or even that he thought fourteen an appropriate marriageable age for the Italian setting he was using” (Evans 31). Although many critics tend to disregard or overlook the significance of Juliet’s extreme youth, Evans argues that “such arguments, which presuppose that

the change in Juliet's age was either unintentional or unimportant, do not seem very persuasive in the light of the excessive attention paid to the matter in the play" (31). Juliet's youth and the unusual amount of attention paid to it is clearly an anomaly in Shakespearean works, and explanations for its intriguing purpose range from its operation as a numerical symbol in Franson's view, or as a necessity for creating tragedy, as in Evans's view.

For Franson, the issue of Juliet's age operates as a numerical symbol: "Shakespeare symbolizes Juliet's youth in a display of numerological virtuosity designed to impress upon his audience and readers her unripeness for adulthood and its attendant complexities" (258). This reading convincingly points to the astonishing number of instances of thirteen and fourteen throughout the play. For instance, Juliet's first kiss with Romeo takes place "between her 13th and 14th lines, a significant juncture in her own text because of its correspondence with the very age at which she is kissed" (251). According to Franson, these numerical symbols ultimately define the numbers thirteen and fourteen as an "unripe" age for "adulthood and its attendant complexities." Occurrences such as these are too many and too meaningful to simply be a coincidence, and regardless of whether one completely agrees with Franson's reading, his attention to these details cements Juliet's age as an indisputably critical issue of the play.

Evans offers another intriguing reading by arguing that Juliet needed to be younger than sixteen for the type of tragedy Shakespeare was creating in *Romeo and Juliet*: "Why should he have bothered to change her age unless he needed her to be fourteen in the kind of tragedy he was writing?" (Evans 31). Associating Juliet's youth with sexual awakening, Evans argues: "For the tragedy as he conceived it Shakespeare needed a young girl just on the threshold of sexual awakening. He did not feel he could chance it with a sixteen year old" (31). For Evans, Juliet's youth, sexual awakening, and lack of previous romantic relationships all help her become "the

Juliet who has captured our hearts” (31). If Shakespeare had not lowered Juliet’s age and thus made her more naïve and inexperienced, perhaps her love-at-first-sight infatuation with Romeo would not be quite as endearing. Evans implies that the audience needs to fall in love with Juliet in order to feel the pain she suffers throughout the play and experience the tragedy Shakespeare intended.

Another possible reading of Juliet’s age is as a critique of the dangers of young love. As Franson points out, “one historian even wonders whether Shakespeare was deliberately writing a play about the dangers of love and marriage among boys and girls” (246). This suggestion has many merits, especially when one considers the tragic outcome of the play; *Romeo and Juliet* depicts two teenagers who throw themselves into a frantically-paced relationship seemingly without regards to the consequences of their actions that ultimately cost them both their lives. In this sense, I suggest that the play challenges the authenticity and prudence of “love” among young teenagers. This reading is consistent with the plethora of textual evidence that contradicts the popular idea of Romeo and Juliet’s love being authentic or “real,” such as the previously discussed issue of Romeo’s fickle love (as evidenced in the case of Rosaline). Although popular culture often celebrates the “love” between Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare calls attention to its inherently problematic nature by creating a disturbingly young Juliet whose age would have concerned an Elizabethan audience and should still raise questions among a modern audience.

Although Shakespeare pays an unusual amount of attention to Juliet’s extreme youth in the text, many critics seemingly gloss over this anomaly. For instance, critic Lindsey Scott argues that Zeffirelli promotes the sexual agency of Juliet in his 1968 film while Luhrmann represses it in his own 1996 adaptation. While I do agree with Scott’s analysis that Luhrmann’s film focuses on Romeo as the active subject and Zeffirelli’s focuses to a greater degree on Juliet,

her discussion of the physical representation of Juliet's body in both films is disturbing in light of her refusal to take Juliet's extreme youth into consideration. Scott acknowledges Juliet's age, but seems either unaware of its possible implications or unwilling to address them; her only analysis of Juliet's age comes in the rather dismissive form of this quotation: "Despite the fact that Shakespeare's heroine 'hath not seen the change of fourteen years,' critics observe how Juliet's use of language would have allowed an Elizabethan audience to 'grasp her sexual knowledge and her consciousness of carnal desire'" (Scott 138). Here, Scott acknowledges Juliet's youth, but she quickly qualifies it with a discussion of Juliet's sexual maturity and mastery of language to avoid truly addressing the issue. By burying Juliet's age within the larger argument of her "sexual knowledge" and "carnal desire," Scott can subvert this disturbing complication in order to more effectively argue for Juliet's sexual maturity as represented in Zeffirelli's and Luhrmann's films.

Scott praises the ability of Zeffirelli to promote Juliet's sexual agency through privileging her gaze over Romeo's and using her body as a symbol of sexual maturity. Scott effectively argues that Zeffirelli "visually cod[es] Juliet as bearer of the look and provid[es] a unique space for a 'feminine' gaze," as much of the film's camera shots focus on Juliet's facial expressions and her reactions (rather than Romeo's). She further asserts that Zeffirelli treats Juliet "as the film's active subject" (139), particularly in comparison to Luhrmann's film, which "privileges Romeo's perspective" (143). In contrast to her praise of Zeffirelli's portrayal of Juliet, Scott contends that "Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* features a Juliet who is oddly lacking in the desire and agency of Shakespeare's heroine," and cites her "still, objectified body" as evidence.

Although Zeffirelli disturbingly promotes Juliet's sexual agency in his film, he also shows remarkable sensitivity to the text's issue of young motherhood, as evidenced in the scene

where Paris propositions Capulet for Juliet's hand in marriage. As Capulet pronounces that his daughter is "but a stranger in the world," he and Paris stand in front of a window through which they can see Juliet gleefully laughing and playing with the nurse in a very innocent, childlike fashion. This childlike depiction of Juliet supports Capulet's decree that she is too young for marriage, and the discussion seems closed both literally and figuratively as Capulet shuts the window through which they watch Juliet play. Furthermore, Capulet's remark that girls who are made mothers young are "too soon marred" is forebodingly depicted by Zeffirelli. With Capulet and Paris now standing in front of an adjacent window, Paris argues, "younger than she are happy mothers made," and at this moment Capulet's wife appears in a parallel window across the courtyard. Lady Capulet stops, and with a chilling glower she fiercely stares at her husband before shutting the window, at which point Capulet declares, "and too soon marred are those so early made." This subtle exchange clearly marks Lady Capulet as a woman who, at least in Capulet's mind, was "too soon marred" by becoming Juliet's mother at such a young age, and evidence of her damaged state can be seen in her cold indifference to her daughter throughout the play. The parallel between the age at which Lady Capulet became a mother and Juliet's own age paints a dark future for the young bride, who faces the same premature "marring" that her mother endured.

Another important aspect of Juliet's sexuality in both Zeffirelli's and Luhrmann's films comes in the form of each director's casting decision for Juliet's role. Zeffirelli casts the curvy, voluptuous Olivia Hussey as Juliet, and in her own argument Scott neglects to analyze his highly sexualized portrayal of her. Hussey's full-figured body is repeatedly highlighted throughout the film, such as in the balcony scene, where her ample breasts spill over the constraints of her low-cut dress as she leans on the balcony ledge. Perhaps the most explicit representation of Juliet as a

sexualized girl is evidenced in the scene where she and Romeo consummate their marriage. Here, Hussey performs a nude scene as Juliet, and her breasts are completely exposed at one point as she lies in bed with Romeo. I suggest that these representations of Juliet in Zeffirelli's film actually objectify Hussey's Juliet to a much greater extent than Luhrmann's Juliet, despite



Olivia Hussey as Juliet leaning on her balcony ledge. Image location: <http://transmedialshakespeare.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/olivia-hussey.jpg>

Scott's argument to the contrary. By choosing a Juliet with a voluptuous figure and repeatedly highlighting sexual parts of her body throughout the film, Zeffirelli represents Juliet as a highly sexualized girl and consequently objectifies her. He also objectifies Juliet by asking the audience to focus their gaze on her rather than on Romeo. Zeffirelli's depiction of Juliet both as an innocent, laughing child at the beginning of the film and as a sexual object in later scenes creates an end result of a confusing mixture of youth and sexuality, which can perhaps ultimately be seen as indicative of puberty itself.

In contrast to Zeffirelli, Luhrmann casts the pretty but boyishly thin and straight-figured Claire Danes as Juliet, and her physical representation throughout the film can be seen as more fittingly innocent than Hussey's highly sexualized Juliet. On a bodily level, Danes is a direct contrast to Hussey's; where Hussey had voluptuous curves, Danes has little to none, which is arguably more appropriate as a representation of a girl who has yet to turn fourteen. However, Scott argues that Luhrmann's Juliet is still objectified through her "stillness," and further asserts that in her Botticelli angel costume at the Capulet ball, "[Juliet's] body becomes a visual replica of the many porcelain figures of angels and cherubs that adorn her dressing table" (Scott 141).



*Claire Danes as Juliet leaning on her balcony ledge.
Image location: <http://shessmart.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/claire-danes-romeo-and-juliet-dress.png>*

While Scott rather ineffectively posits that Danes is objectified while Hussey is not, she makes a valid point in addressing the connotations of Juliet's angel costume, especially in relation to Romeo's costume of a knight. Critic Elsie Walker describes Romeo's costume as "the romantic armour of a knight" and Juliet's as "the feathered wings of an earth-bound angel" (Walker 129). Walker argues that with these costumes, "the lovers are imaged as icons of a bygone era—they represent the kind of idealism that is

unsustainable in the postmodern world of the film" (129). Luhrmann consistently portrays

Romeo and Juliet as a kind of solution to the crumbling "postmodern world" around them, and his choice to depict them as a knight and an angel emphasizes their purity.

Luhrmann's consistent association of angel imagery with the innocence of Juliet speaks to the larger theme of religion in his film, which is evidenced in the blatant and frequent appearances of religious iconography. For Luhrmann, a world dominated by devout Catholicism is also dominated by violence and death, and the two often go hand-in-hand. For instance, when Leonardo DiCaprio's Romeo kills Tybalt, he shoots him underneath a large statue of Jesus while using a gun with a portrait of the Virgin Mary embedded into the handle. The irony of the situation is hard to miss, especially with regards to the prolific Catholic imagery elsewhere in the film. In this case, Romeo commits murder with the assistance of the Virgin Mary, who benignly

smiles up from the gun handle after the overwhelmed Romeo drops it to the ground. Meanwhile, the enormous Jesus statue stands over the horrific scene with outstretched hands as Tybalt's blood flows into the pool of water at Jesus's feet. This use of religious iconography is not merely coincidental or "devoid of depth or truth," as Scott argues; rather, it can perhaps be understood as a satirical critique of religion on Luhrmann's part.

The religious iconography in Juliet's bedroom functions both as satire and as a symbol of her unique innocence. Juliet does not possess Virgin Mary handguns, nor does she commit murder (with the exception of herself) beneath enormous Jesus statues. Instead, Juliet's bedroom is dominated by statues of the Virgin Mary, angels, and religious candles, all of which symbolize her innocent youth and her purity amid the corruption of Luhrmann's Verona. Unlike other instances of religious iconography in the film, Juliet's statues are never the scene of violence or murder. Despite the statues' connotation of innocence, their secondary satirical function is evidenced in the scene where Juliet ponders Tybalt's death in her bedroom. When Juliet learns that Romeo killed Tybalt, Luhrmann's camera focuses on Juliet's candlelit shrine to the Virgin Mary. Lightning crashes in the background, further illuminating the statues as Juliet asks, "O God, did Romeo's hand shed Tybalt's blood?" (3.2.71). As Juliet speaks these words, the camera slowly shifts from close-ups of one religious statue to another. This parallel of Juliet's question with a focus on her religious statues seems to impose a certain blame upon God for allowing the murder of Tybalt, particularly because she addresses God specifically. In contrast, in Zeffirelli's film as well as the text, Juliet begs this question not necessarily of God, but of the Nurse, who is present throughout the entire scene. Zeffirelli's Nurse sobs in Juliet's bedroom as she cries, "O Tybalt...that ever I should live to see thee dead!" (3.2.61-63). Juliet then frantically asks, "O God, did Romeo's hand shed Tybalt's blood?" to which the Nurse responds, "It did, it did, alas

the day, it did” (3.2.71-71). In Zeffirelli’s film, Juliet’s question is literal; she asks the Nurse if Romeo killed Tybalt, and the Nurse confirms that he did. In Luhrmann’s scene, however, Juliet asks God and God alone, and the focus on her silent religious statues implies that Juliet’s question is not literal, but rhetorical; she knows that Romeo did slay Tybalt, and her question now is why God allowed it.

Critic Courtney Lehmann defends Luhrmann’s prolific use of religious iconography through a brilliant association between religion and water, which is another prominent symbol in Luhrmann’s film. Lehmann remarks that “the abundant baptismal-water imagery” is “unanimously considered by critics to be the most innovative aspect of Luhrmann’s film” (Lehmann 201). For instance, Juliet is first introduced to the audience as she is completely submerged in her bathtub, the camera focusing on her face underneath the water. This scene is recalled later in the film when Romeo dunks his own head in a bowl of water to recover from his ecstasy trip at the Capulet ball; Luhrmann gives the same view of Romeo’s face floating in water that he showed of Juliet’s face in the bathtub. Moments after dunking his head in the bowl—which miraculously eliminates his drug-induced hallucinations—Romeo spots Juliet for the first time through a large aquarium filled with blue water and fish. The two star-crossed lovers tantalizingly follow each other’s movements as they edge along the aquarium, their eyes flirting with one another through the water. Other uses of water are abundant later in the film as well, including during the balcony scene, in which Romeo and Juliet fall into the Capulet swimming pool together, and in the scene of Tybalt’s death, in which Tybalt falls backward into a pool of water and floats there bleeding to death.

With such rich symbolism teeming from just the mentioning of these scenes, it should come as no surprise that Lehmann rebukes *People* critic Leah Rozen for stating that Luhrmann

“piles on religious iconography ... and bathes the whole [film] in pointless water imagery” (Lehmann 210). As mentioned earlier, Scott similarly disregards Luhrmann’s use of religious iconography, stating that it is “devoid of depth or truth” (Scott 141). On Luhrmann’s use of water imagery and religious iconography, Lehmann refutes both Rozen and Scott when she states, “These two crucial innovations couldn’t be more pointed, particularly when we consider the fact that the film’s ubiquitous water imagery and cross iconography are inextricably linked through the rite of baptism” (Lehmann 210). As a friend once pointed out to me, this “baptism” is perhaps most evident when Luhrmann omits Romeo’s line, “Call me but love and I’ll be new baptized,” and instead has the two lovers fall into the Capulet swimming pool together at the exact moment he would have spoken those words, literally depicting the water bathing of a baptism (2.1.92). By replacing the line where Romeo speaks of his desires to shed his Montague name and be “new baptized” with the action of Romeo falling into water, Luhrmann directly parallels the water in his film with religious baptism, renewal, and rebirth.

Luhrmann’s abundant use of religious iconography takes on special significance when one considers the censorship of plays during Shakespeare’s time,¹ which would have limited the liberties Shakespeare could take with sensitive subjects such as religion. Andrew Gurr notes that in late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England, “the Master of the Revels licensed each company and censored its plays. He was expected to cut out any references to religion or affairs of state” (Gurr 82). As University of Colorado at Boulder professor Richelle Munkhoff once pointed out to me during a conversation, modern film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*—as well as other Shakespearean plays—offer directors more freedom both thematically and visually than Shakespeare was afforded during his own time due to this censorship of certain subjects such as

¹ For an excellent and comprehensive history of the theater and stage productions in Shakespeare’s time, see Andrew Gurr’s “The Shakespearean Stage.”

religion. Professor Munkhoff further suggested that Luhrmann takes full advantage of his modern artistic freedom by exaggerating Shakespeare's subtle underlying critique of Catholicism in *Romeo and Juliet*. This critique is perhaps best evidenced in the character of the Catholic Friar Laurence, who, as Stephen Greenblatt aptly notes, exemplifies "some of the qualities of the stereotypical meddling friar of anticlerical satire" by way of "his sleeping potions, his elaborate plots, and at the close, his fatal cowardice" (Greenblatt 902). While censorship may have limited Shakespeare's ability to use religion as satire, Luhrmann takes evidence such as Shakespeare's subtly negative and satirical portrayal of the Catholic friar and blows it up into a dominating force in his film, where religious clothing, handguns, and statues permeate a world of decay and corruption.

If the religious iconography in Luhrmann's film is not "devoid of depth or truth," as Scott argues, then neither is Luhrmann's Juliet, who Scott compares to the "still and porcelain-like" religious statues in her bedroom, which she claims are "empty extensions" of Juliet (Scott 141). While she may not possess the sexual agency (and sexual objectification, as I argue) of Zeffirelli's Juliet, her agency shines through in other scenes of the film. For instance, Luhrmann's Juliet demonstrates far more agency than Zeffirelli's in the scene where Juliet goes to Friar Laurence's cell for a solution to her forced marriage to Paris. Danes bursts into the Friar's cell and puts a gun to her head as she screams at the friar, demanding either his assistance or her death, whereas Hussey runs into the Friar's cell and throws herself across a table, sobbing over her problems in a stereotypically passive way. Furthermore, while Zeffirelli emphasizes Juliet's youth in the conversation between Paris and Capulet, he almost contradictorily proceeds to depict her as a highly sexualized object for the remainder of the film. This contradiction perhaps represents the confusion of the blossoming sexuality Juliet experiences both in

Zeffirelli's film and the text, although the negative connotations of Hussey's sexual objectification and age should not be overlooked. While Luhrmann completely cuts the lines referencing Juliet's age, his portrayal of her is consistently innocent and youthful, and her agency is demonstrated in forms other than sexuality. Luhrmann's film also devotes a significant amount of its attention to the homoerotic relationship between Mercutio and Romeo, which arguably detracts from available time for the development of Juliet's character.

The textual evidence of Rosaline, Romeo's culturally constructed Petrarchan discourse, and Juliet's age all contribute to the problematic idea of *Romeo and Juliet* as a story of true, tragic love. As always with Shakespeare, there are many more intriguing thematic elements to *Romeo and Juliet* than are initially obvious, such as his subtle critique of Catholicism and the homoeroticism of Mercutio. Although both Zeffirelli and Luhrmann ultimately depict Romeo and Juliet as two star-crossed lovers who share a deep and passionate (if short-lived) love for one another, their directorial choices can also brilliantly highlight buried themes of the text in order to create uniquely significant film retellings of this classic legend.

Chapter III:

Mercutio's Love and Death

With its incessant sexual puns, seemingly harmless swordfights, and the clearly established obstacles that two lovers need to overcome, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* begins as if it is destined to tell the story of a comedy rather than a tragedy. Critic Robert O. Evans recognizes the oddity of this genre mix when he states, "The play begins as comedy, and one of the triumphs of *Romeo and Juliet* is that it is, though almost of mixed genre, successful as a tragedy. Polonius would probably have called it *comico-tragical*" (Evans 23). M.H. Abrams' definitions of comedy and tragedy can help elucidate how *Romeo and Juliet* so thoroughly intertwines these seemingly inherently conflicting genres, and an analysis of the text and its film adaptations can help pinpoint the exact moment that this play abandons its comedic path. Abrams describes comedies as works that are meant to "interest and amuse us" rather than evoke "pity and terror" in us as a tragedy generally strives to do in the classic Aristotelian view (Abrams 38, 331). A comedy "engage[s] our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern," and "we are made to feel confident that no great disaster will occur, and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters" (39). Abrams's description of a romantic comedy, in particular, uncannily describes the first two Acts of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which we are presented with "a love affair that involves a beautiful and engaging heroine" and a story of love that "does not run smooth, yet overcomes all difficulties to end in a happy union" (39). Shakespearean comedy is characterized by its ending in a marriage.

Embodying nearly every element of the romantic comedy, the first two Acts of *Romeo and Juliet* deceptively prepare the reader for the "happy union" a comedy requires. The melancholy Romeo Montague falls in love with the "beautiful and engaging heroine" Juliet

Capulet, only to then discover the obstacle to their love affair presented by their feuding families' mutual hatred. The solution to this desperate obstacle is made apparent by Friar Laurence, who expresses his belief that Romeo and Juliet's marriage can not only survive their families' long-standing feud, but even dissolve it: "For this alliance may so happy prove / To turn your households' rancour to pure love" (2.2.91-92). Friar Laurence here hopes that by marrying Romeo and Juliet, the "rancour" between the Montagues and Capulets will be transformed into pure love, forever ending the violence of their feud that has long plagued Verona. Thus, if *Romeo and Juliet* were to end with the culmination of Act II, Scene V, when Friar Laurence "incorporate[s] two in one" with the marriage of the two lovers (2.5.37), one of the most iconic symbols of tragedy worldwide would perhaps instead epitomize the genre of romantic comedy.

Unfortunately for a whole slew of characters, including Mercutio, Tybalt, Paris, Romeo, and Juliet, *Romeo and Juliet* does not end with Act II. Instead, with the very opening scene of Act III, this play takes a shocking, immediate plunge into the dark, depressing world of tragedy. The turning point of the play—the moment that marks the play's events as having taken a sudden and irreversible turn for the worse—is evidenced in Mercutio's startling death. Although violence should come as no surprise in this play (which, after all, did open with a duel between the servants of the Montague and Capulet houses), the reality of Mercutio's death immediately ends the playful and harmless swordfight violence of the first two Acts. With the death of Mercutio, it is evident that the play has started down a devastating, deadly path from which there is no turning back. The mortally wounded Mercutio forebodingly uses his dying breaths to declare "a plague o' both [the] houses" of the Montagues and Capulets (3.1.101). With the culmination of this astounding scene, it becomes disturbingly evident that the play is leading to a

series of “serious actions” that will “eventuate in a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist”—the very definition of this type of tragedy (Abrams 331).

Considering the extreme significance of Mercutio’s death and the series of disastrous events it triggers, it should come as no surprise that, in their film adaptations of the play, Franco Zeffirelli and Baz Luhrmann interpret this scene in two very different ways. Their directorial choices to include, omit, or add even the tiniest details to this scene have a dramatic effect on its overall meaning within their film. Some of the most critical differences in these two interpretations include Mercutio’s motive for engaging in his deadly battle with Tybalt, the manner in which Mercutio is mortally wounded, and his traumatic final moments. Furthermore, the two directors’ representations of Tybalt’s and Romeo’s reactions to the death differ greatly and carry consequently diverging implications. When considered altogether in context, the small details of Zeffirelli’s representation of this scene imply that Mercutio’s death was tragically accidental. Luhrmann’s interpretation, meanwhile, paints a much more malicious picture of the death, with Tybalt’s incorrigible cruelty, Romeo’s painful submission, and Mercutio’s compassion and love all working together to speak to the film’s larger motifs of homoerotic love and the evil and absolute corruption of Verona.

Zeffirelli’s interpretation of Mercutio’s death primarily utilizes a veritable army of tight-wearing, thrill-seeking, jolly young men to create an atmosphere of playfulness and male showmanship that tragically happens to lead to the accidental death of Mercutio. At the scene’s beginning, Benvolio and Mercutio stroll through a dusty, nearly deserted Verona square while Mercutio lightheartedly shouts out incomprehensible “bah, blah, blah, bah” noises with a white handkerchief playfully covering his face. Benvolio, who senses some foreboding tension in the air, begs the silly Mercutio to retire, for “the Capels are abroad,” and if they meet them, they

“shall not scape a brawl” (3.1 2-3). Mercutio ignores Benvolio’s concerns and continues barking out strange noises as he makes his way over to a fountain in the square. When Benvolio warns Mercutio of the approaching Capulets, Mercutio defiantly declares, “By my heel, I care not,” and proceeds to submerge himself in the fountain of water (3.1 32). Tybalt and a group of no less than fifteen boisterous young cronies then approach Mercutio, watching as he gurgles water.

Even before any verbal interaction has taken place between Mercutio and the Capulets, it is clear that Zeffirelli interprets this scene as one of play and male bravado. Mercutio begins the scene with his silly noises, and then gurgles water in the fountain as he pointedly ignores the Capulet gang. The Capulets, meanwhile, send raucous laughter across the square as they meander through it to approach Mercutio. When Tybalt finally asks Mercutio for “a word,” Mercutio exacerbates the playful aura of the scene by responding, “And but one word with one of us? Couple it with / something: make it a word and a blow” (3.1 35-36). The potentially menacing undertone of this statement is completely offset by Mercutio’s smile and his tone; he speaks in a booming, exaggerated voice as if he is putting on a show for the Capulet gang rather than engaging in a heated argument with a foe. The playfulness of the exchange is further confirmed by the Capulets’ appreciative laughter and jeers; Mercutio’s witty comeback has obviously pleased his audience. Tybalt then sits down on the edge of the fountain next to Mercutio, making his intent clear when speaks the loaded statement, “Mercutio, thou consort’st with Romeo” (3.1 40). Tybalt, who took great offense to Romeo’s presence at his family’s feast, obviously desires to locate the young Montague and unleash the repressed anger that his uncle forbid him to express at the feast itself.

After earning another round of appreciative laughter with a clever play on the words “consort” and “minstrel,” Mercutio suddenly elevates the situation by declaring, “Here’s my

fiddlestick; here's that shall make you dance. Zounds—'Consort!'" (3.1 43-44). As he references his "fiddlestick," Mercutio pulls out his sword, and Benvolio immediately begs Mercutio to resolve the situation peaceably. Benvolio's concerns, however, prove to be unfounded, for at that moment Tybalt spots Romeo and tells Mercutio, "Well, peace be with you, sir. Here comes my man" (3.1 52). Although the interaction between Tybalt and Mercutio appeared to be gaining a violent edge with the drawing of Mercutio's sword, Tybalt makes it clear that he has no real interest in dueling Mercutio, and he moves on to confront Romeo.

Tybalt's subsequent interaction with Romeo—marked by its complete lack of violence—is one of the most significant differences between Zeffirelli's interpretation of the scene and Luhrmann's, in which Tybalt viciously beats a defenseless Romeo. In Zeffirelli's scene, Romeo appears in the square and calls out gaily to Mercutio, presumably in high spirits because he has just been married to Juliet. As Romeo runs towards Mercutio, he is confronted by Tybalt, who greets him with the following insult: "Romeo, the love I bear thee can afford / No better term than this: thou art a villain" (3.1 55-56). In a continuation of the strangely playful environment of this charged scene, Romeo simply smiles at Tybalt as he says in a friendly voice, "Tybalt, the reason that I have to love thee / Doth much excuse the appertaining rage / To such a greeting. Villain am I none. / Therefore, farewell. I see thou knowest me not" (3.1 57-60).

The remainder of the interaction between Romeo and Tybalt is similarly lighthearted. After excusing the great insult of being called a "villain," Romeo skips over to Mercutio, his high spirits seemingly unaffected by the insulting exchange. Tybalt, however, recovers from the shock of Romeo's dismissal and demands that Romeo "turn and draw" (3.1 62). Again, Romeo refuses to participate in an argument or violence with Tybalt, cryptically referencing his marriage to Tybalt's cousin as an explanation: "I do protest I never injured thee, / But love thee better than

thou canst devise / Till thou shalt know the reason of my love. / And so, good Capulet—whose name I tender / As dearly as mine own—be satisfied” (3.1 63-67). As he tells Tybalt to “be satisfied,” Romeo grabs Tybalt’s hand and shakes it, reinforcing the showmanship of the scene; this action draws appreciative laughter and claps from Mercutio. Tybalt and his men, on the other hand, look momentarily stunned by Romeo’s reaction. Romeo’s claim that he “tenders” the name Capulet “as dearly as [his] own” is undoubtedly perplexing to the Capulet boys, although the audience knows that Romeo’s marriage to Juliet is precisely the reason for this benevolence. In an effort to outwit Romeo in this competition of male bravado, Tybalt then smells the hand that Romeo touched and makes a face of disgust, accompanied by an exaggerated “ew” noise. Tybalt’s audience approves with another round of booming laughter, and even Romeo cracks a smile as Tybalt dramatically washes his hand off in the fountain.

The reason that Mercutio engages in a swordfight with Tybalt marks yet another crucial difference between Zeffirelli’s and Luhrmann’s interpretations of Mercutio’s death. In Zeffirelli’s scene as well as in the text, Mercutio fights Tybalt to protect his own honor and pride. Mercutio taunts Tybalt in the text in order to get him to duel, and he physically chases Tybalt down in Zeffirelli’s film, marking him as the aggressor in the situation. Luhrmann, however, completely alters this interaction; his Mercutio intervenes in order to protect Romeo, who is being mercilessly beaten by Tybalt.

Mercutio’s decision to duel with Tybalt in Zeffirelli’s film seems to stem simply from his hot temper and ego. After Tybalt finishes washing his hand in the fountain, he suddenly splashes water on Mercutio, who is still submerged in the water. Mercutio becomes enraged, shouting, “O calm, dishonourable, vile submission!” as if to denigrate Romeo’s “submission” to Tybalt and simultaneously indicate that he himself has no such “vile” intentions. Mercutio angrily jumps out

of the fountain, pushing away Benvolio, and calls out, “Tybalt, you ratcatcher!” to Tybalt’s retreating back. Tybalt, who is leaving the square with his men, turns and asks what Mercutio wants of him. Mercutio then tells the “Good King of Cats,” Tybalt, that he wants “nothing more” than one of his “nine lives” (3.1 72-73). Ignoring Benvolio’s continued protests, Mercutio proceeds to run up behind Tybalt and place his sword against his throat. Tybalt turns to face Mercutio, pushing down the sword, and then draws his own weapon, declaring, “I am for you, sir.” The manner in which Zeffirelli’s Mercutio pursues a fight with Tybalt—even though Tybalt was actually in the process of retreating—is a marked difference from Luhrmann’s interpretation, in which Tybalt is the aggressor and Mercutio the defender.

The actual fight scene between Mercutio and Tybalt is heavily interspersed with laughter, clapping, and handshakes, and can be described in no other way than as a “show.” After Mercutio chases down Tybalt, the two proceed to duel, but in a playful, almost pretend fashion, despite Mercutio’s seemingly very real annoyance with Tybalt. The large group of men in the square surround Tybalt and Mercutio as they fence against one another, laughing and jeering as

if the duel is merely continuing the show of male bravado and poses no real threat to either man’s well being. In fact, there are several instances when both Tybalt and Mercutio

would have had an opportunity



Zeffirelli’s Tybalt and Mercutio during the fight scene.

Image location: http://beautydart.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/romeo_juliet_fight_tybalt.jpg

to actually kill one another, if that was their intent; however, neither ever takes the chance to wound the other. For instance, at one point, Mercutio's sword has been knocked from his hand, and Tybalt has the tip of his own sword pressed against Mercutio's neck. Mercutio and the onlookers are quiet, serious, and obviously concerned for one brief, tense moment, and then Mercutio crosses his arms across his chest and begins whistling in a carefree manner, restoring the playful tone of the fight. Even Tybalt laughs when Mercutio responds in this way. Mercutio then sneaks around to Tybalt's back, holds out his hand, and the two men proceed to companionably shake hands in the middle of their "fight," the audience once again roaring with laughter.

The make-believe nature of the duel is once again confirmed when Tybalt accidentally stabs Mercutio and then looks at the blood on his sword in horror, making it evident that he never intended to actually harm Mercutio. Having just taken his turn "besting" Tybalt in this exchange of male wit and bravado by gaining possession of Tybalt's sword and tossing it at him, Mercutio then leaps onto the fountain ledge in victory, shamelessly provoking Tybalt. Tybalt, looking embarrassed and angry, charges at Mercutio to continue the duel. Mercutio happily engages, continuing their fencing match, but Romeo—worried about the Prince's ban on violence between the Capulets and Montagues—tries to separate them. Romeo shoves Tybalt backwards, away from Mercutio, and tries to keep Mercutio from jumping down off the fountain ledge to pursue Tybalt; as Mercutio jumps forward, Tybalt comes running back to him, and Tybalt's sword then pierces Mercutio's abdomen as the two men meet. The circumstances of the wound are thus completely accidental, and Romeo's interference could even be considered the cause, just as is implied in the text. Indeed, Mercutio later places the blame upon Romeo both in the text and the film when he asks him, "Why the devil /came you between us? I was hurt under

your arm” (3.1 97-98). When one considers the relative innocuousness of their previous banter, there is little evidence to indicate that the fight would have taken a deadly turn had Mercutio and Tybalt been allowed to continue their duel uninterrupted.

Furthermore, when Tybalt realizes that there is blood on the tip of his sword, his facial and bodily reactions undeniably suggest feelings of shock, horror, and remorse. Tybalt sees the blood, and Zeffirelli’s camera then zooms in on his horrified face to give the audience a clear view of his reaction. Tybalt appears devastated; he is breathing heavily, his eyebrows furrowed. He then looks over at Mercutio, who is struggling in Romeo’s arms, and looks back at his sword, still digesting the gravity of the situation. The Capulet boys tell Tybalt that it is time to go, but Tybalt protests by staring and pointing at Mercutio. Tybalt looks confused and is clearly still in shock; he struggles to break free of his men’s grip so he can go to Mercutio. The strength and urging of his men, however, finally prevails, and Tybalt turns and runs away from the scene with his men.

The terror and horror in Zeffirelli’s interpretation of Mercutio’s death is all saved up for those last few, intense moments when Tybalt realizes that he has actually killed a man with whom he had very few qualms; after all, although Mercutio is a dear friend to Romeo, he is not a Montague. Zeffirelli emphasizes play, showmanship, and youthful ignorance in depicting the accidental death of the Prince’s nephew.

In contrast, terror and horror are a constant presence in Luhrmann’s interpretation of this scene—the unavoidable products of a heartbreaking, violent brawl. Luhrmann’s scene teems with malicious intentions, disturbing violence, and, perhaps most importantly, the contrast of Mercutio’s love for Romeo with Romeo’s newfound love for Juliet. Mercutio engages in the fight with Tybalt not because he was insulted with a splash of water, as Zeffirelli’s Mercutio

was, but in order to save Romeo's life. Mercutio's homoerotic relationship with Romeo climaxes in this scene, when he sacrifices his own well being for that of his dear friend. Romeo, meanwhile, blinded by the fresh love of his marriage to Juliet, is determined that no harm come to Tybalt, her flesh and blood, even at the expense of Mercutio's health. Romeo's prioritization of his love for Juliet over his love for Mercutio can ultimately be seen as the cause of Mercutio's demise. Luhrmann's film represents homoerotic love as a fantastical glimmer that is inextricably linked to Mercutio's life; when he dies, so does the hope of homoerotic love. Romeo chooses his love for Juliet over his love for Mercutio, consequently choosing and upholding the narrative of heterosexual love now dominant in our society.

The opening scene of Luhrmann's interpretation of Act III instantly creates a foreboding atmosphere of real danger, especially when compared to Zeffirelli's scene, which is dominated by play. Immediately following an image of Romeo and Juliet kissing as they marry one another at the end of Act II, Luhrmann then seamlessly transitions to the sound of gunshots and thunder cracking against a background of threatening music as Mercutio stands knee-deep in the sea, firing his gun into the water. Displayed prominently in the center of the shot, a storm brews on the ocean's horizon, its depths occasionally lit by flashes of lightning. As Mercutio fires more shots into the sea, Benvolio shouts from the top of a towering lifeguard stand that they should retire, for "the day is hot" and the "Capels are abroad" (3.1 2). The throaty snarls of the Capulets' blue car confirm Benvolio's declaration that they "are abroad" as it passes through the background of the scene, its occupants audibly shouting out the windows. Luhrmann then further increases the foreboding atmosphere of the scene by closing in on Benvolio's face as he quietly and grimly whispers, "And if we meet we shall not scape a brawl, / For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring" (3.1 3-4). Luhrmann vastly increases the drama of the scene by having

Benvolio whisper these ominous words so that only the audience can hear him. With the threatening music, looming storm, and Benvolio's dramatic premonition, Luhrmann has managed to communicate to his audience in less than thirty seconds that the tone of the story is drastically shifting from play and love to violence and tragedy.

The sequence in which Tybalt confronts Mercutio is the closest Luhrmann comes to injecting any type of play into his interpretation of the scene. After the tenseness of the previously described opening of Act III, Luhrmann cuts to Mercutio teasing Benvolio about his willingness to quarrel as the two men make their way past a series of tropical, thatch-roofed shops on the beach. Mercutio, the Montague boys, and the other beach visitors are laughing, but the atmosphere is still nowhere near as playful as that of Zeffirelli's. The ominous drama of the opening scene still hangs in the air, and it is not long before the mood again turns dark.

As Benvolio, Mercutio, and the rest of the Montague boys sit at a table outside a shop on the beach, still joking and laughing, Benvolio's smile suddenly turns into a wide-eyed look of panic. Tybalt and two accompanying Capulets park their vehicle nearby and exit, dressed in the not-so-subtle black attire expected of villains. The "villainess" of the Capulets is emphasized when one of Tybalt's men hisses at a small boy as he exits the car, causing the child to clamber off the ground in fear and run away. Witnessing this, Benvolio declares, "By my head, here comes the Capulets," to which Mercutio lightheartedly responds, "By my heel, I care not" (3.1 31-32). Mercutio smiles and places his foot upon the table—with a clear shot of his "heel"—to emphasize his indifference. However, the danger of the situation is becoming increasingly apparent; Tybalt and his two men have now gathered together outside the vehicle, and Tybalt quietly whispers, "Follow me closely," with a foreboding rock melody jumping in to accompany Tybalt's line and emphasize the danger the Capulets pose as they stride towards the Montagues

(3.1.32).

The subsequent interaction between Tybalt and Mercutio is marked by Mercutio's clever and playful refusal to return Tybalt's anger—that is, until Tybalt accuses him of “consorting” with Romeo, a loaded sexual accusation that is especially critical in Luhrmann's film. When Tybalt finally approaches Mercutio and the Montagues and asks for “a word with one of [them],” Mercutio breaks the tense atmosphere by appearing surprised by their presence, and asking that Tybalt instead couple it with “a word and a blow” (3.1 34-35). Unlike Zeffirelli's film, where the exchange between Mercutio and Tybalt was overtly lighthearted, Tybalt is far from amused by Mercutio's refusal to take him seriously. Tybalt fiercely tells Mercutio that he shall be “apt enough” to give him a blow, should Mercutio simply give him “occasion” (3.1 36-37). Mercutio, however, does not even turn around to look at Tybalt as he walks away from him in complete disinterest, and then throws his hands up in the air, boisterously declaring to the surrounding beach patrons, “Could you not take some occasion without giving?” The audience laughs, but Tybalt screws up his face in anger and mockingly spits out, “Mercutio, thou [art] consort'st with Romeo” (3.1 40). The pace and tone of the scene immediately shifts gears once again; Mercutio stops in his tracks, his back still to the Capulets, and then finally turns his head to stare at Tybalt, a look of loathing upon his face. A dramatic drumroll begins as Mercutio angrily repeats, “Consort?,” and the camera pans to Tybalt's still livid face, then to Benvolio's own nervous expression, and then back to Mercutio's fuming glare. Mercutio is no longer willing to sarcastically dismiss the words of the Capulets; the word “consort” triggers him, and he charges at Tybalt.

Tybalt's use of the word “consort” is critical in Luhrmann's interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* because of its sexual implications. Luhrmann blatantly emphasizes his homoerotic

understanding of Romeo and Mercutio's relationship early on in his film, particularly when he chooses to dress Mercutio as a transvestite for the Capulet ball. Luhrmann's Mercutio also becomes unreasonably angry during the "Queen Mab" speech, and it is with dismissive disdain that he references Romeo's heterosexual feelings first for Rosaline and then for Juliet. Through these and other methods, Luhrmann clearly establishes Mercutio's love for Romeo as more than just that for a friend; Mercutio has intimate feelings for Romeo. These feelings are so obvious that they are evident even to Tybalt, who cleverly and cruelly accuses Mercutio of "consorting" with Romeo, knowing that this will anger Mercutio as nothing else can. Although the meaning usually associated with "consort" today is "to accompany, keep company with; to escort, attend" (OED), this complex word also has sexual and musical connotations, the latter of which Mercutio plays on in his response to Tybalt.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, there is evidence that by the early seventeenth century, "consort" had developed the meanings "to be a consort or spouse to, to espouse; to have sexual commerce with," and, even more directly, "to have intercourse with" (OED). These meanings are dated around the year 1600 and later, and, although *Romeo and Juliet* was written around 1595, it is quite likely that the word "consort" already possessed its sexual connotations, given the rampant evidence for Mercutio's homoeroticism elsewhere in the play. Even if Shakespeare's use of the sexually loaded "consort" was somehow coincidental, its emphasis in Luhrmann's film is certainly far from it. Luhrmann even adds the word "art" to Tybalt's accusation, insinuating that Mercutio's "consorting" with Romeo is present and ongoing; Mercutio *is* "consort'st with Romeo" (3.1 40), in contrast to the text's slightly more vague "thou consort'st with Romeo," which does not define the action as happening at that very moment (3.1 40). Tybalt's accusation, then, can perhaps be more directly rewritten as, "Thou art

having intercourse with Romeo,” and Mercutio’s instant anger at the phrase confirms his sensitivity to its sexual meaning.

In what can be understood as the poignant climax of Mercutio’s homoerotic love for Romeo, Luhrmann makes the decision to have Mercutio die defending Romeo’s life. Romeo’s arrival at the beach triggers an atmosphere of tension and violence that eventually turns deadly for Mercutio, who sacrifices his own life to save Romeo from Tybalt’s relentless beating. Zeffirelli’s Tybalt never lays a hand upon Romeo; in fact, after Romeo refuses to engage in a fight with Tybalt, he and the rest of the Capulets are in the process of actually leaving the square when Mercutio chases them down, presumably greatly offended by having been splashed with water in the fountain. However, in Luhrmann’s film, the sense of real, impending danger that was foreshadowed by the gunshots, storm, and Benvolio’s dramatic hushed whisper finally comes to fruition through Romeo’s beating and Mercutio’s subsequent death.

As the enraged Mercutio and Tybalt circle around one another preparing to fight after the “consort’s” insult, Romeo suddenly arrives at the beach in his car and skids to a stop in the background of the scene. Tybalt smiles and tells Mercutio, “Peace be with you, sir. Here comes my man” (3.1 51). Mercutio’s face turns from one of anticipatory adrenaline to one of heart-sinking panic when he learns that Romeo has arrived, and the Montague boys trade similar wide-eyed looks of horror. Romeo gleefully yells, “Mercutio!” as he runs towards his friend; Tybalt’s subsequent yell of “Romeo” brings him to a halt. A quiet, haunting melody replaces the noisy chaos of Mercutio and Tybalt circling one another, and everyone stands perfectly still, the tension building. Romeo’s concerned face looks to Mercutio, whose grim face is framed in the orange glow of the setting sun as he looks back to Tybalt with resignation. Tybalt yells to Romeo that he is a “villain” and then spits on the ground, his face full of hate and rage. Without taking

his eyes from Romeo's face, Tybalt snaps his fingers at one of his men, who promptly comes to his side and removes his gun, which is decorated with a portrait of the Virgin Mary. The Capulet man removes all bullets but one and places the gun back into Tybalt's holster.

Romeo's non-violent reaction to the threat of Tybalt's gun is driven by his decision to privilege his love for Juliet over his love for Mercutio. As Tybalt's man finishes unloading the bullets and cocking the gun, the grim Mercutio reaches across Romeo's chest to prepare his gun for the duel as well. Romeo, however, pushes Mercutio's hand away and shakes his head, refusing to take part in a fight that could spill the blood of his beloved Juliet's kin—even if it places him and Mercutio in harm's way. Tybalt stands with his arms outstretched, clearly inviting Romeo to take part in the duel; Romeo, however, walks towards Tybalt, stops in front of him, and slowly and carefully says, "Tybalt, the reason that I have to love thee / Doth much excuse the appertaining rage / To such a greeting. / Villain am I [not]." (3.1.57-59). Unlike Zeffirelli's Romeo, who quickly and lightheartedly delivers these lines, Luhrmann's Romeo says

each word slowly and deliberately, pausing for emphasis on the words, "Villain am I not." Then, as Romeo excuses Tybalt with the words, "Therefore, farewell. I see thou

knowest me not," he raises his hand to shake Tybalt's,

just as Zeffirelli's Romeo shook Tybalt's hand. However, Luhrmann's rendition of the



Mercutio's grim face framed in the setting sun as Tybalt taunts Romeo. Image location: http://www.hotflick.net/pictures/big/996RNJ_Harold_Perrineau_Jr_005.html

handshake pointedly emphasizes the difference between the playfulness of Zeffirelli's scene and the danger of his own. Romeo holds his hand out only to have it slapped away by the enraged Tybalt, a rejection of the possibility of peace. The camera then pans to Mercutio's dismal expression, his face still framed in the orange glow of the setting sun as if to emphasize these moments as the metaphorical sunset of his life.

Romeo's decision to then turn and walk away from Tybalt sparks the fight that eventually ends with Mercutio's death, and in this scene Mercutio's emotional reaction to Romeo's beating takes precedence, emphasizing his strong, homoerotic attachment to his friend. Tybalt screams at Romeo's retreating back, "Boy, this shall not excuse the injuries / That thou has done me," and he chases him down, demanding that he "turn and draw" (3.1.61-62). Tybalt shoves Romeo to the ground and viciously kicks him, drawing blood from his mouth. The camera repeatedly focuses on Mercutio's dangerously furious face, clearly wanting to emphasize his emotional reaction to Romeo's injuries. Still lying on the sand of the beach, Romeo tries to quell Tybalt's anger by telling him he has "never injured" him; he then rises to his knees and tells Tybalt, "And so, good Capulet—which name I tender / As dearly as mine own—be satisfied" (3.1.66-67). It is after these lines that Zeffirelli's Romeo playfully shakes Tybalt's hand; Luhrmann's Romeo, however, who is on his knees before Tybalt, dramatically draws his gun at these words and limply holds it by the handle in surrender as he repeats the plea, "be satisfied." Tybalt once again smacks Romeo's hand down, insisting on violence, and it is at this point that Mercutio can no longer stand to see Romeo's chosen defenselessness. Mercutio angrily says to himself, "Calm, dishonorable, vile submission," (3.1.68), and the dramatic, haunting melody of the scene picks up its urgency as Tybalt is seen chasing Romeo towards the dilapidated stage where Romeo could be found pining over Rosaline at the beginning of the play.

Luhrmann's decision to place this scene at the stage associated with Rosaline is extremely significant. It subtly and poignantly highlights the devastating effects of the competing types of love in the film—Romeo's heterosexual love for Rosaline and Juliet, and Mercutio's own homoerotic commitment to Romeo. Tybalt chases Romeo onto the stage, pushes him to the floor, and then sadistically kicks him with so much force that Romeo is sent flying backwards off the stage. Romeo's continued refusal to defend himself is an indication of his dedication to loving Juliet—he still will not raise a hand to harm her kin. The Montagues and Capulets hurry after Tybalt and Romeo, and Romeo's man Balthasar is shown staring in shock at the violence as Tybalt repeatedly stomps his foot into Romeo's chest, spitting out the displaced line, "Thou art my soul's hate." Neither Balthasar nor any of the other onlookers raise a hand to help end the pitiful, one-sided fight. Mercutio, however, still back behind the stage, suddenly wrenches his gun from its holster, contemplates it, and then throws it down to the sand, indicating his desire to keep the fight from turning deadly even as he runs to help Romeo. Simultaneously, the camera cuts to images of Tybalt relentlessly raining down blows on Romeo's bloody face, his head dangerously wobbling and his eyes rolling back into their sockets. At that moment, Mercutio suddenly leaps off the stage with a large piece of wood in hand, yelling "Tybalt!," adding, "You ratcatcher!" as he violently swings the club at Tybalt (3.1.70). Mercutio's decision to intervene to save Romeo's life marks the culmination of his love for Romeo, particularly because this love leads to his death. Furthermore, Mercutio's intervention was necessitated by Romeo's love for Juliet; Romeo's refusal to defend himself in order to protect the person he loves triggered Mercutio to intervene in order to save the person *he* loves.

In a subtle yet brilliant addition to this scene of clashing heterosexual and homoerotic loves, the name "Rosaline" can be seen prominently displayed in large white spray-painted

letters across the left side of the stage as Mercutio swings his wooden weapon at Tybalt in Romeo's defense. The name "Romeo" can also be seen scrawled in smaller letters on the right side of the stage. As discussed earlier in this paper, Romeo's problematic love for Rosaline undermines the legitimacy of his feelings for Juliet. The juxtaposition of "Rosaline" and "Romeo" on opposite sides of the stage is a clear reminder of the questionable nature of Romeo's love for Rosaline and subsequently for Juliet. Robert O. Evans writes that "until [Juliet] proposed marriage the essential difference between Juliet and Rosaline was simply that Juliet encouraged Romeo while Rosaline resisted him. It was to prevent us from seeing this too clearly that Shakespeare kept Rosaline off stage, though she was a guest at the ball and readily available" (73). While Shakespeare physically keeps Rosaline off stage in order to "prevent" the audience from seeing "too clearly" the troubling parallels between Romeo's love for Rosaline and his love for Juliet, as Evans argues here, Luhrmann cleverly and literally places Rosaline on the stage by having her name spray-painted there. By literally putting Rosaline's name on the stage, Luhrmann intentionally reminds the audience of what Shakespeare wanted them to forget: that given Romeo's romantic past, his love for Juliet may not be so authentic after all. The fact that Luhrmann includes this prominent, well-placed reminder of Romeo's fickle love right in the midst of Mercutio defending Romeo because Romeo will not harm Juliet's kin is horribly and significantly ironic. The implication is that Romeo's love for Juliet is as superficial as his love was for Rosaline, and likely not worth dying over; yet Mercutio's genuine love for Romeo is strong and true enough that he sacrifices his life to save Romeo from his shallow love for Juliet.

The heartbreaking depth of emotion that Romeo expresses at Mercutio's death seems to be a moment of realization for him; when Mercutio dies, Romeo realizes that he has lost the genuine love of his friend, and his reaction indicates regret for having taken for granted the love

Mercutio had for him. After Mercutio leaps off the “Rosaline” stage to come to Romeo’s defense, he quickly gains the advantage in the fight with Tybalt through a series of vicious blows, finally throwing him onto a large window lying in the sand near Romeo. The window’s glass shatters when Tybalt lands on it, and he lies there in the glass-ridden sand groaning and rolling in pain. In a slowed, choppy camera shot, the weary Mercutio bends down to pick up the wooden beam and prepares to strike the downed Tybalt with it. Romeo, however, who has somewhat recovered from his vicious beating, continues to defend Tybalt by insisting that Mercutio not harm him any further. Romeo stumbles towards Mercutio and wraps his arms around him to prevent him from landing the blow on Tybalt, telling him, “Forbear this outrage, [good Mercutio]” (3.1.81). Romeo continues to hold onto Mercutio and looks desperately into his eyes as if begging him not to hurt Tybalt, again reinforcing his choice of heterosexual love by refusing to let harm come to Juliet’s cousin. This intervention proves fatal for Mercutio; as Romeo and Mercutio focus on each other’s faces, Tybalt recovers enough to seize a large piece of glass from the broken window. Mercutio’s eyes break away from Romeo’s and look with rage upon Tybalt when he hears him grab the glass shard, and he appears to charge at Tybalt right as Tybalt lunges towards Mercutio and Romeo. In the chaos that follows, Tybalt manages to stab Mercutio in the abdomen with the glass shard, sealing his fate.

Mercutio’s unexpected and irreversible death sparks the chain of events that mark this play as a tragedy. The haunting melody that began with Romeo’s arrival picks up where it left off, reminding the audience that something horrible is about to happen. Both sobbing and laughing, Mercutio stumbles onto the Rosaline stage with his hand over his wound. Benvolio asks, “Art thou hurt?” (3.1.88), to which Mercutio dismissively responds, “Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch” (3.1.89). Mercutio then draws himself up to his full height on the stage, faces Romeo,

Tybalt, and the rest of the Montagues and Capulets, throws his free hand up in the air, and shouts, “A scratch!” his words reverberating off the stage. Mercutio laughs, and Romeo now seems perplexed and concerned; he comes up to Mercutio and says, “Courage, man. The hurt cannot be much” (3.1.91). Mercutio sneaks in one last word pun on the double-meaning of “grave” as he tells Romeo, “‘Twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man” (3.1.93-94). It is at this point that Mercutio reveals to the audience the extent of his injuries. He turns away from Romeo and faces the camera alone, removing his hand from what is revealed to be a gaping slash in his abdomen running from his hip to beneath his belly button. Mercutio has a private moment of fear as he sobs in front of the camera, and then he composes himself and turns angrily to the Montagues and Capulets before the stage, viciously telling them, “A plague on both your houses” (3.1.95). He turns and walks towards the back of the stage, muttering “They have made worms’ meat of me,” (3.1.102), before he finally turns around to face them once more, screaming in emotional rage, “A plague on both your houses!” (3.1.101).² A malicious boom of thunder accompanies the word “houses” as the sky threateningly darkens above the white-capped sea behind the stage. The word “houses” echoes repeatedly throughout the theater as the thunder continues; the camera eventually pans to Tybalt’s bloodied, terrified face. The storm’s winds blow in with Mercutio’s curse, knocking over two bicycle shops, throwing around trash and sand, and forcing the beach shops to close their doors. With the storm already answering to Mercutio’s foreboding words, Luhrmann leaves no doubt that his final

² In a longer version of this paper, I would include a discussion of the relationship between plague in Shakespeare’s time—which is imagery that runs throughout *Romeo and Juliet*—and the modern-day AIDS epidemic, effectively arguing that Luhrmann subtly hints at the possibility of AIDS as a modern-day plague in his filmic version of Verona. Luhrmann’s film creates an echo of AIDS and its plague-like detriment through examples such as the scantily clad prostitutes perpetually stationed in the background of Verona. These prostitutes and the highly sexualized portrayal of the rest of the population contribute to Verona’s overall sense of decay and corruption, an outcome which can perhaps be attributed to a community “plagued” by AIDS. This idea was first suggested to me by Professor Jane Garrity, and was further developed through discussions with Professor Richelle Munkhoff, both of the University of Colorado at Boulder.

curse of “a plague” on both the houses of Montague and Capulet will be fulfilled.

Romeo’s emotional reaction to Mercutio’s death is one of the most poignant moments of the film. Tybalt’s reaction, meanwhile, lacks the intense regret and sorrow of Zeffirelli’s Tybalt, who clearly did not mean to actually harm Mercutio. As the storm sends beach patrons scurrying for cover, Mercutio flees from the stage and runs to the beach with Romeo following closely at his heels. The camera momentarily focuses on Tybalt and the Capulets, who have remained near the dilapidated stage. Tybalt’s torn expression as he watches Mercutio stumble away arguably indicates some level of regret for what he has done, but it is neither as clear nor as emphasized as in Zeffirelli’s interpretation of the scene, where Tybalt’s shocked and sorrowful countenance emphasizes the accidentalness of the murder. Instead, Luhrmann’s Tybalt seems to be caught up in a moment of realization of the gravity of what he has unleashed. Although several characters, including Romeo, expressed foreboding premonitions of tragedy in the Acts leading up to Mercutio’s death, critic Clifford Leech notes that “until the moment when Mercutio is killed, the threat is not anywhere heavy” (Leech 10). The play largely follows the pattern of comedy until Tybalt’s irreversible slaying of Mercutio unleashes a sequence of deaths, including Tybalt’s own killing at the hands of Romeo. Luhrmann’s Tybalt is horrified at the irreversibility of the chain of events he has triggered; he stares at Mercutio with wide, scared eyes until his men finally convince him to run away, the storm still raging in the background.

As Tybalt fearfully watches Mercutio’s death from afar, Romeo gathers Mercutio up in his arms on the beach and sobs as they exchange their last words to one another. Mercutio weakly asks Romeo, “Why the devil / came you between us? I was hurt under your arm” (3.1.98). Romeo painfully whispers to him, “I thought it all for the best” (3.1.99). These lines, while highly appropriate in the text and in Zeffirelli’s rendition of the scene, seem to

inadequately describe the true circumstances of Mercutio's death in Luhrmann's film. Romeo's interference when Mercutio attempted to finish the fight with a blow to Tybalt is simply the last action in a series of Romeo's decisions that caused Mercutio's death. More important and devastating were Romeo's repeated refusals to protect himself, which necessitated Mercutio's involvement in the fight. By repeatedly prioritizing his heterosexual love for Juliet over anything else—including his and Mercutio's lives—Romeo caused Mercutio's death. Mercutio blames Romeo even as he dies, although Luhrmann's dedication to using the text's script does not do justice to the dynamics of the situation leading up to Mercutio's death.

Particularly foreboding, though, are Mercutio's very last words; with Romeo still cradling his head, Mercutio slowly repeats to him the curse of "a plague on both your houses." Romeo, seeing that Mercutio dies after these words, heartbreakingly screams "No!" with renewed thunder and lightning crashing in the sky behind him. Tybalt and the Capulets take



Mercutio dying on the beach in Romeo's arms in Luhrmann's Romeo + Juliet. Image location: <http://image.toutlecine.com/photos/r/o/m/romeo-et-juliette-1997-20-g.jpg>

flight, running to their car, and the camera returns to focus on Mercutio's corpse lying on the beach. Romeo screams, "Mercutio!" as he gathers his dead friend up in his arms, sobbing with an unprecedented depth of emotion. With the dramatic lament of a choir group singing in the

background, Luhrmann's music addition once again increases the drama and emotion of the

scene. Leonardo DiCaprio's skills as an actor are arguably showcased in this scene more than in any other, as he fiercely presses Mercutio to his chest in one final embrace. He then lays Mercutio out on the ground, patting his body, and pushes himself up into a standing position, holding his hands to his head in a moment of panic and emotion. Romeo intently stares down at Mercutio, breathing heavily, and slowly starts to back up. One can almost see a plan formulating in his mind as he calms down, stares off in the distance, and then takes off running towards his car. Benvolio chases after him, yelling "No!," and the camera keeps Mercutio's body focused in the foreground as Benvolio can be seen struggling to keep Romeo from getting into his car in the background. Romeo, of course, wins the struggle, and speeds off to avenge Mercutio's death through Tybalt's murder. Luhrmann ends the scene with a long focus on the crumbling stage where Romeo pined for Rosaline, where Mercutio gave his heated Queen Mab speech, and where Mercutio later met his demise as a result of Romeo's heterosexual dedication to Juliet.

Chapter IV:

Homoeroticism and the Homosocial Order

In Zeffirelli's film and in the text, one of Mercutio's most important functions—at least in terms of plot—is his hot-headed aggression in instigating the fight with Tybalt that triggers the tragic events of the play. This chapter will focus on how Luhrmann removes Mercutio from his aggressor role and instead spends time developing his homoeroticism, even deliberately altering the plot of the text in order to further accentuate Mercutio's role as the homoerotic lover. Mercutio's homoeroticism plays into the larger context of a world and homosocial order that blurs sex and gender boundaries.

Robert O. Evans remarks that “next to Romeo and Juliet, [Mercutio] is the most important person in the play, for it is from his mercurial action in picking a quarrel with Tybalt that the tragedy proceeds. He is the efficient cause” (82). There is no doubt that Mercutio's death, as I have argued, triggers the sequence of tragic events that leads up to Romeo's and Juliet's suicides. As Evans astutely points out here, it is Mercutio himself who arguably brings about his own death by insisting on fighting Tybalt. This is evidenced in the text when Mercutio ignores Romeo's pleas to “put thy rapier up” and instead says to Tybalt, “Come, sir, your *passado*,” or “forward thrust” (3.1.78-79). Mercutio here clearly invites Tybalt to duel with him. Furthermore, according to stage directions, it is Mercutio who draws his sword first as he says, “O calm, dishonorable, vile submission!” in response to Romeo's refusal to engage in a fight with Tybalt (3.1.68). Zeffirelli retains Mercutio's instigation of the fight in his film version of the scene; in fact, Zeffirelli exaggerates Mercutio's role and arguably places even more of the blame on him than does the text. As discussed earlier, in Zeffirelli's interpretation of the scene, Tybalt and his men are actually leaving the square when Mercutio chases Tybalt down and insists on a

duel, presumably to avenge the insult of being splashed with water. Evans remarks that an Elizabethan audience would have understood that Mercutio made this grave mistake because, “bad as it turned out,” it was still “completely in character” (82). Evans continues, “It was not his fault that he became the agent of Romeo’s banishment and eventually the death of the lovers, for he could not change what he was” (82). For Evans and for an Elizabethan audience, it was Mercutio’s nature to begin a fight with Tybalt, and it was his role to set the tragic events of the play into motion.

What happens, then, when Mercutio is no longer the person responsible for the tragic chain of events his death unleashes? If Mercutio is so important, as Evans argues, primarily because “it is from his mercurial action” in dueling with Tybalt that the tragedy unfolds, how is he important if he is no longer the aggressor in the fight scene? In Luhrmann’s film version, the blame for the tragic events of the play could not be more removed from Mercutio. He does not pick a fight with Tybalt to defend his own honor, as Zeffirelli’s Mercutio does, nor does he hungrily jump into the duel because he craves violence, as the text suggests. Luhrmann’s Mercutio becomes involved in the fight only when it becomes obvious that Romeo will be seriously injured or killed if he does not prevent Tybalt from continuing to ruthlessly beat him. In fact, Mercutio drops his gun to the sand before running to Romeo’s aid, as if to indicate that he wants to keep the fight from turning deadly. Luhrmann’s seemingly small change to Mercutio’s motive for engaging in a fight with Tybalt has huge implications, particularly when one remembers Evans’s argument that Mercutio’s importance in the play is inextricably linked to his role as the instigator of tragedy. Luhrmann does not lessen Mercutio’s importance by taking this away from him; instead, he increases his importance by giving him an even more important role as the film’s representation of homoerotic love.

I argue that Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* is not so much about Romeo and Juliet as it is the struggles of competing heterosexual and homosexual loves. The text's suggestions of Mercutio's and Romeo's homoerotic relationship is exaggerated to great proportions by Luhrmann, not the least of which is evidenced in Mercutio's blatant drag queen costume at the Capulet ball. In this regard, Mercutio's role in the film is absolutely critical; he embodies the homoerotic possibilities open to Romeo and the world, and Luhrmann seems to privilege this relationship until Mercutio's death, when the focus shifts to the remaining heterosexual love. Critics like Lindsey Scott have acknowledged "that the film centers on DiCaprio's Romeo rather than Danes's Juliet" (141), an observation which speaks to Luhrmann's privilege of Romeo's struggle between competing loves rather than solely on his relationship with Juliet. Despite Luhrmann's initial privilege of the homoerotic relationship between Mercutio and Romeo, Mercutio's death ends the possibility of homoerotic love. Instead, the heterosexual love of Romeo and Juliet eventually "cures" Verona of its violence by bringing the Montague and Capulet families together, even though it is at the cost of Romeo's and Juliet's lives. In contrast, Mercutio's and Tybalt's deaths only fueled the hatred between the Montagues and the Capulets.

In a brilliant discussion of sexuality and social order in *Romeo and Juliet*, Jonathan Goldberg perhaps more accurately describes these competing relationships as the "homosocial order" of the play. In a rejection of what he calls a typical reading of the play in which *Romeo and Juliet* is a world dominated by male-male bonds and the compulsory heterosexuality that ideally results from it, Goldberg describes Coppélia Kahn's vision of a "social order" which when working properly "would effortlessly produce heterosexuality" (Goldberg 84). Goldberg rejects the simplicity of this argument, which he likens to high-school readings of the play. Instead, Goldberg suggests "that the homosocial order in the play cannot simply be reduced to a

compulsive and prescriptive heterosexuality” and “that sexuality in the play cannot be sheltered from sociality” (84). These complex statements are fleshed out in the remainder of Goldberg’s argument, but can rather inadequately be summarized as the idea that homosocial order in the play does not and should not always result in heterosexuality, and that sexuality in the play is inextricably linked to the social order of the play and the two must always be considered together. Social order and sexuality are not separable for Goldberg. The homosocial order that depends upon male-male relationships does not result in effortless heterosexuality. Instead, Goldberg suggests that sexuality is directly impacted by the closeness of males in the homosocial order. These ideas have direct implications for a reading of sexuality as presented in Luhrmann’s film, especially with regards to Mercutio.

In terms of understanding sexuality in *Romeo and Juliet* and its film adaptations, it is important to distinguish between the mindset of Luhrmann’s modern-day audience in 1996 and the audience that first experienced Shakespeare’s star-crossed lovers in 1595. In a defense of his rejection of readings of the play that enforce compulsory heterosexuality, Goldberg brings up the excellent point that these readings should be rejected not only on ideological grounds, but also on a historical basis. The ideas of “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality,” Goldberg argues, “are profound misnomers for the organization of sexuality in Shakespeare’s time” (89-90). Sexuality was perceived entirely differently in Shakespeare’s time than it is today. Dymphna Callaghan illustrates this point when she prompts the reader to consider the implications of the ban on female acting in Shakespeare’s world:

Consider, for example, that in its Elizabethan production, *Romeo and Juliet* were portrayed not by an actor and an actress but by a suitably feminine-featured male performer and a slightly more rugged youth, and that the erotic homology produced by

this situation was compounded by the presence of the profoundly homoerotic Mercutio.

(61)

Both Goldberg and Callaghan seem to imply that sexuality was not bound by the just two categories of either “heterosexual” or “homosexual” in Shakespeare’s times; rather, gender and sexuality exist in many different forms. Apart from the literal homoeroticism in this play posed by a man playing the role of Juliet, many of Shakespeare’s other plays also rely upon a blurring of gender roles and sexual desire. In *Twelfth Night*, for instance, the female Viola disguises herself as a male she calls Cesario and then becomes employed by Orsino, the male Duke with whom she is in love. Although the audience knows that Cesario is really a female and that the attraction she and Orsino have for one another is therefore actually an attraction between a man and a woman, Orsino returns Cesario’s feelings while still under the impression that she is a man. The homoeroticism evidenced in this situation is even further complicated by the fact that in Shakespeare’s time, Viola was played by a man pretending to be a woman pretending to be a man who is, of course, in love with a man. The point of illustrating this example is to argue that readings of *Romeo and Juliet* that ignore or dismiss its homoeroticism are inherently flawed, and that to insist it moves towards compulsory heterosexuality is a mistake given its history.

Luhrmann certainly recognizes the homoeroticism evidenced in the text of the play, but the reality of both twentieth-century film and modern-day perceptions of sexuality forces him to present it in a unique and complicated way—primarily through his transvestite representation of Mercutio. By dressing Mercutio in a silver-sequined two-piece mini dress complete with bright red lipstick, a white afro wig, and sparkly silver pumps, Luhrmann not only makes his reading of Mercutio’s homoeroticism evident—he makes it absolutely impossible to miss. I am not suggesting that Mercutio is simply gay—although I would not necessarily argue that he isn’t—

but rather that Luhrmann wants to make his reading of Romeo's struggle between male-male love and heterosexual love as evident as possible. Although Mercutio's costume could be dismissed simply as part of the fun and games of the Capulet costume ball, Luhrmann specifically turned him into what can be best described as a transvestite drag queen, and the significance of this costume should not be overlooked. The significance of the knight and angel costumes of Romeo and Juliet, respectively, has already been remarked



*Luhrmann's Mercutio in costume prior to the Capulet ball.
Image location: http://www.tg-films.info/films_r/pics/r%26j96a.jpg*

upon; Elsie Walker astutely argues that these costumes mark them as “icons of a bygone era” and representative of “the kind of idealism that is unsustainable” in Luhrmann's postmodern Verona (129). Walker's reading of Mercutio's costume is somewhat less satisfying; she says merely that Mercutio's sequined “dress of a drag queen” marks him as an outcast “existing on the social fringe” (129). As I have already suggested, Mercutio's costume has the much more important and accurate function of blatantly labeling him as representative of homoerotic love. Courtney Lehmann eloquently expresses this view when she states, “While Zeffirelli only hints at Mercutio's homoerotic attachment to Romeo, Luhrmann's Mercutio is a black-skinned, white-sequined, drag queen who seems desperately disturbed by Romeo's heterosexual awakening” (193). Luhrmann dresses Mercutio as a drag queen in order to make it easier for a modern-day audience to see the tension between Romeo and Mercutio's homoerotic relationship and Romeo's “heterosexual awakening” (193).

One of the earliest and cleverest examples of Mercutio's disdain for Romeo's heterosexual awakening is evidenced when Mercutio sings along to Kym Mazelle's "Young Hearts Run Free" in front of Romeo and deliberately changes one of the phrases in order to criticize Romeo's love for Rosaline. With the ever-important role of music in Luhrmann's film, it is productive to pay attention to the lyrics of the song Luhrmann chooses to use to introduce "drag queen" Mercutio. When Mercutio drives up to the Rosaline-stage in his red sports car and sequined two-piece mini dress to meet up with Romeo and the rest of the Montagues on the night of the Capulet ball, the disco-diva-dance number "Young Hearts Run Free" accompanies his arrival. Aside from having a lively disco beat that perfectly accentuates Mercutio's dancing to the song—which include a move entailing pulling up his skirt and revealing one cheek of his backside—the song's lyrics also carry the message of not tying oneself down to a lover, and in particular a heterosexual lover. Mazelle begins the song by crooning, "What's the sense in sharing this one and only life / Ending up, just another lost and lonely wife / You count up the years, and they will be filled with tears." Mercutio sings along to the line, "Just another lost and lonely wife," as he waves the invitation to the Capulet ball in front of two of the Montague boys' faces. He then dances his way over to Romeo, who is sitting at the side of the stage, and sings along to the next lines of the song while thrusting his groin towards Romeo and suggestively pulling the party invitation out from underneath his skirt. The lyrics Mercutio sings along to are, "Young hearts, run free / Never be hung up, hung up like my man and me." Although the words "my man and me" are the original lyrics sung by Mazelle in the background, Mercutio instead changes "my man and me" to "Rosaline and thee" as he playfully sings to Romeo. The implications of this change are extremely significant; Mercutio is literally telling Romeo not to be "hung up" on love with Rosaline. Furthermore, the song speaks specifically of heterosexual

love and husband /wife relationships, as indicated by the female singer referencing her “man” and herself, and the fact that she warns against becoming a man’s “lost and lonely wife.” Mazelle sings that sharing one’s entire life with a heterosexual lover will only bring “tears,” and Mercutio specifically warns Romeo of this danger by replacing “my man and thee” with “Rosaline and thee.” With his suggestive dancing and female attire, it seems that Mercutio is suggesting to Romeo a homoerotic alternative to the doomed heterosexual love life Mazelle outlines in her song.

Two more significant indications of Mercutio’s rejection of heterosexual love can be found in his seemingly irrational and inexplicable anger during both the Queen Mab speech and in the scene in which Romeo jumps out of the Montague car at the Capulet mansion to return to Juliet. The famous Queen Mab speech manifests itself both in the text and in Luhrmann’s film after Mercutio invites Romeo to dance with them; Romeo replies that he cannot dance because he has “a soul of lead / So stakes [him] to the ground [he] cannot move” due to his love-induced depression (1.4.15-16). Romeo and Mercutio then engage in a discussion about love, during which Romeo questions whether love is “a tender thing,” as Mercutio suggested, claiming that it instead “pricks like thorn” (1.4.25-26). Mercutio crudely suggests, “If love be rough with you, be rough with love. / Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down” (1.4.27-28). Mercutio’s crude and unromantic portrayal here of love as forceful sexual domination conveys his impatience for Romeo’s romantic heterosexual desires. In Luhrmann’s film, Mercutio then shoves Romeo onto the stage and attempts to force him to dance with the others, but Romeo eventually throws him off and yells, “But ‘tis no wit to go” (1.4.49). Whether Romeo is referring to their discussion of love or the impending Capulet party is rather ambiguous. Romeo then begins to say that he had a dream last night, one which we can assume cautions against attending

the Capulet ball; Mercutio, however, interrupts and begins to tell the story of Queen Mab, whom he claims “hath been” with Romeo (4.1.53).

Luhrmann’s rendition of the Queen Mab speech—remarkably delivered by Harold Perrineau, Jr. in a noteworthy performance—is marked by its astonishing anger and the surprising addition of an ecstasy tablet. In his comprehensive analysis of Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech, Robert O. Evans summarizes it by arguing that it “presents what were the main reasons for marriage—money, place, and love—and then presents what in the milieu of *Romeo and Juliet* was a principle destructive force—violence” (79). If the Queen Mab speech primarily focuses on marriage, as Evans convincingly demonstrates, then Mercutio’s seemingly unfounded anger takes on a special significance. As one watches Perrineau’s Mercutio rage and yell the lines of his Queen Mab speech, gathering more and more anger as he continues, finally culminating in his scream of the lines, “This is she! This is she!,” one of the most perplexing questions of the film comes to mind: why is Mercutio so angry during this speech? This question can best be answered through a homoerotic analysis of Mercutio’s and Romeo’s relationship. After explicitly singing to Romeo not to be “hung up” on heterosexual love and after quarrelling about the “tender” nature of love, Mercutio expresses his frustrations towards Romeo’s “heterosexual awakening” by delivering a heated speech about “Queen Mab,” a name that means “whore” and “prostitute,” respectively (Norton 917 note 7). This speech’s underlying meanings refer to marriage, a heterosexual institution that Mercutio seems to reject, as evidenced in the song “Young Hearts Run Free.” Romeo watches Mercutio with a grim, concerned expression as his friend kicks the ground, throws rocks, and screams at the sky with a rage that is understandable only in terms of Mercutio’s anger at Romeo’s heterosexual awakening. The ecstasy pill that Mercutio presents to Romeo as the physical embodiment of Queen Mab is also an interesting

addition to the scene. The stamp of a heart on the pill can naturally be seen as a symbol of love, but Mercutio's association of the pill with the Queen Mab that he so loathes is quite perplexing. Perhaps when Romeo swallows the pill, he is dominating and destroying the heterosexual love it represents, and thus fulfilling Mercutio's earlier wish that he "beat love down" (1.4.28). Furthermore, on a much more speculative note, ecstasy is responsible for heightened emotions and feelings of intimacy for others, and one can ponder whether Mercutio would have any motivation to induce these feelings in Romeo in order to open his eyes to homoerotic possibilities.

Mercutio's second significant outburst of anger towards Romeo is expressed when Romeo leaps out of the Montague car as they leave the Capulet ball so he can run back to the mansion to pursue Juliet. As Romeo, Mercutio, and the rest of the Montagues drive through the security checkpoint as they exit the Capulet estate, Romeo turns his body around in the backseat and gazes longingly back at Juliet, who is standing on a balcony watching Romeo leave with the same torn expression he wears. Suddenly, Romeo leaps from the car and sprints into the darkness of the garden walls of the mansion. All the Montagues immediately begin yelling Romeo's name, but it is Mercutio who leaps over the side of the car and runs several steps after Romeo, clearly upset as he calls his name and attempts to coerce him into returning through conjuring up Rosaline's image. In order to judge whether Mercutio is upset because he knows Romeo is leaving him for Juliet—a woman—it must first be evidenced that Mercutio was aware of the spark between Romeo and Juliet during the party. In fact, there is a direct indication that Mercutio realized Romeo's infatuation with Juliet, a detail that Luhrmann actually changes from the text by giving one of Benvolio's lines to Mercutio. During the ball, at the moment that Romeo and Juliet realized they were mortal enemies by rite of birth—with Juliet standing on the

second level of the mansion looking down at Romeo while he gazes horrified up at her— Mercutio suddenly comes up to Romeo’s side, puts his arms around his shoulder, and clearly looks up at Juliet to see at whom Romeo is staring so intently. Mercutio says, “Away, be gone, the sport is at the best,” once again looking up at Juliet, on whom Romeo’s eyes are still fixed (1.5.116). Mercutio then pulls Romeo away by the hand. Interestingly, the line in which Mercutio tells Romeo it is time to leave actually belongs to Benvolio. By giving Mercutio the line instead and making it clear that Mercutio sees Romeo and Juliet gazing at one another, Luhrmann plants one more seed of evidence to continue building the conflict between competing homoerotic and heterosexual loves. In fact, Mercutio here directly pulls Romeo away from heterosexual love and tells him, “Away, be gone,” and insists that Romeo leave with him. When Romeo leaps from the car and returns to Juliet, it is clear that Mercutio’s anger stems from his rejected homoerotic desires.

Jonathan Goldberg compellingly argues that desire in *Romeo and Juliet* is not restricted by gender boundaries, an idea that supports Luhrmann’s emphasis on Mercutio’s homoerotic relationship with Romeo. Any man or woman may be substituted for another, and Goldberg even argues that Rosaline could be viewed as a man in terms of her function. Goldberg asks what the implications are of thinking of Juliet, Rosaline, and Romeo all as potential occupiers of the role of the “rose” Juliet famously speaks of that “remains itself whatever it is called” (Goldberg 85). The rose is an object of desire, and Goldberg argues that the interchangeability of its human counterpart has the following consequence: “At the very least, a recognition that desire might not be determined by the gender of its object, that the coupling of Romeo and Juliet is not a unique moment of heterosexual perfection and privacy but part of a series whose substitutions do not respect either the uniqueness of individuals or the boundaries of gender difference” (85). This

idea speaks not only to sexual desire, but also to companionship; Goldberg points out that Romeo's relationships have an effect on other persons as well, including Benvolio, who has a personal stake in seeing Romeo overcome his grief, for "a happy Romeo would be a happier companion" (85). Goldberg argues that Romeo and Juliet are not caught up in a "unique moment of heterosexual perfection of privacy," an idea that I have also challenged due to the haste and insubstantiality of their relationship as well as the problem of Rosaline. The lack of "privacy" that Goldberg mentions is excellently demonstrated in his argument that the play secures a homosocial order dependent upon a "configuration that continually triangulates the relation of Romeo and Juliet, adding in every instance a third term that gives the lie to the shelter of their love" (83). Although Goldberg cites examples like "Capulet and Paris as the patriarchal couple trading Juliet between them" as evidence of this triangulation, I argue that Mercutio is also an excellent example of a third person involved in Romeo's relationships, first with Rosaline and then with Juliet. Romeo's decisions in these relationships, particularly in the fight scene when he refuses to harm Juliet's cousin, have a direct—and in that case deadly—impact on Mercutio's own life. Just as Benvolio would benefit from having a happier friend if Romeo forgot his love for Rosaline, Luhrmann's Mercutio would have benefited by keeping his life had Romeo not prioritized his love for Juliet over his love for Mercutio.

The lack of boundaries of gender difference that Goldberg identifies in the text of *Romeo and Juliet* are curiously reinforced when considered alongside Barbara Hodgdon's argument for the androgynous beauty of many of Luhrmann's actors. Leonardo DiCaprio in particular, she points out, has a neutral physical appearance that appeals to both women and men alike, reinforcing the idea that gender has no boundaries in Luhrmann's film. Hodgdon eloquently writes, "In a culture fascinated by youth and in a subculture where one is most interesting if

one's sexuality cannot be defined, DiCaprio's pale androgynous beauty—sharp Aryan looks and hint of exotic heritage, a quintessential Greek boy god—makes him a polysexual figure, equally attractive to young women and to gay and straight men” (93). By casting a Romeo whose appealing looks transcend gender and desire boundaries, Luhrmann further emphasizes the mix of homoerotic and heterosexual love in his film. Romeo can easily be a partner for either Juliet or Mercutio, and indeed any person of any gender or sexual preference. Hodgdon remarks upon Romeo's subverted homoerotic desire for Mercutio when she calls his relationship with Juliet a “forbidden, secret love in which Juliet can substitute for Mercutio” (93). Here, the theme of substitution explored by Goldberg once again emerges, this time even further explicated by Hodgdon's discussion of Luhrmann's emphasis on androgynous appearances. Romeo is not the only androgynous character in the film; Hodgdon calls Mercutio Romeo's “double” and explains that “Mercutio shares his gender-bent androgyny” (95). Mercutio's own androgyny—which is blatantly emphasized by his gender-mixing drag queen costume—makes him an easy substitute for Juliet. Furthermore, Juliet can also be seen as physically neutral; as discussed earlier, Claire Danes lacks the voluptuous feminine curves of Olivia Hussey's Juliet, which identifies Danes's straight, thin Juliet as androgynous and easily interchangeable with Mercutio.

Luhrmann weaves an intricate web of homoerotic, homosocial, and heterosexual relationships throughout his film interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*. In no character is homoeroticism more emphasized than in Mercutio, who is feminized through Luhrmann's drag queen costume and who, out of his profound love and commitment to Romeo, sacrifices his own life to save Romeo's. Mercutio's sacrifice is an extremely significant addition by Luhrmann because he deliberately alters the motives behind Mercutio's involvement in the battle between Romeo and Tybalt. This deviation from both the text and Zeffirelli's film precedent has

important implications for Luhrmann's theme of competing homoerotic and heterosexual love. As described earlier, Zeffirelli's Mercutio willingly chases Tybalt down and fights him in order to protect his own honor; Luhrmann's Mercutio, however, becomes involved in the fight that ends his life in order to protect Romeo from Tybalt's merciless beating. Hodgdon notes through its complex series of relationships, Luhrmann's film "catches [Romeo and Juliet] up within a widening circle of homoerotic and homosocial relations" (95). The heartbreaking scene of Mercutio's death represents not only the turning point of the play but also the culmination of these "homoerotic and homosocial relations."

Mercutio's death effectively eliminates the possibility of homoerotic love, but its effects linger and contribute to the play's disastrous ending. Romeo's tremendous grief for his dead love snaps the commitment to his heterosexual love for Juliet that he so steadfastly maintained throughout the fight scene by refusing to harm her cousin. Romeo abandons his heterosexual love for Juliet and embraces his love for Mercutio when he furiously hunts Tybalt down and murders him beneath the Jesus statue. Unfortunately, this action also eliminates the possibility of successful heterosexual love; Romeo and Juliet's relationship is doomed, for Romeo must either leave Verona forever or suffer death should he return. Luhrmann's complex web of homosocial relationships, of substitutions and androgynous interchangeability, interconnects the various types of competing love in his film to the point that each destroys the other.

Conclusion

Despite the complicated relationship between homoeroticism and heterosexual desire in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, today the play has evolved into a cultural icon of idealized heterosexual love in pop culture. For instance, country star Taylor Swift can be heard singing about Romeo and Juliet's "difficult" but "real" love in her song "Love Story," *Twilight* series author Stephenie Meyer relates her heterosexual vampire love story to *Romeo and Juliet*, and Meredith Grey of ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* can be found comparing her complicated heterosexual love life to that of Romeo and Juliet in an episode from the third season. Once one begins listening and looking for references to *Romeo and Juliet*, they suddenly start popping up unexpectedly in an astounding variety of mediums—in songs playing on the radio, on common television shows, and even in previews in movie theaters. I recall taking my eight-year old sister to see Disney's *Tangled* in December 2010, and to my surprise and utter horror I found myself accosted by a preview for a new children's movie called *Gnomeo and Juliet*, a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* with computer animated garden gnomes playing the characters!

Although I admittedly have not seen *Gnomeo and Juliet*, I can only imagine that its attention to Shakespeare's intricacies falls somewhat short of those seen in Zeffirelli's and Luhrmann's own film adaptations of the play. To be fair, the movie is targeted towards children, and it would thus make sense for it to simplify some of these themes. But this film serves as a reminder that children in the United States are exposed to the story of *Romeo and Juliet* from a very young age, and their experiences with films like *Gnomeo and Juliet* will shape their understandings and perceptions of the play for years to come. With dominating and prolific pop culture representations of *Romeo and Juliet* consistently preaching the story of heterosexual love between the titular characters, perhaps it should come as no surprise that the beautiful

complications of competing homoerotic and heterosexual loves in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* are often neglected. Despite Luhrmann's emphasis on Mercutio's homoeroticism in his own film, it would be quite easy for an audience that has been exposed to pop culture's representation of *Romeo and Juliet* as compulsory heterosexuality to dismiss or even be completely unaware of Luhrmann's underlying themes of competing love and sexuality. For many people, *Romeo and Juliet* is simply the tragic story of a boy and a girl who shared a passionate true love and then had it all taken away from them before their time.

This project has aimed to explore the fascinating complications of the multiple and competing types of love, desire, and relationships in Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, using Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film precedent to come to a better understanding of different representations of critical issues of the play. The accuracy of the frequent modern day portrayal of Romeo and Juliet as quintessential heterosexual lovers has been brought into question through an examination of the problem of Rosaline, the implications of Juliet's extreme youth, and the competing homoerotic love relationship represented by Mercutio. With its rampant, blatant references to sexuality—such as the prostitutes that can be spotted on Verona's streets, the multitude of signs, ads, and pictures of barely-clothed women, and Mercutio's transvestite, drag queen costume, Luhrmann's film has created a visual representation of the wide variety of types of love and sexuality in *Romeo and Juliet*. Luhrmann's innovative and bold representation of Mercutio's and Romeo's relationship, as well as his clever utilization of Rosaline—think of her name on the stage—sheds a refreshing light on *Romeo and Juliet* and calls into question the traditional reading as embodying compulsory heterosexuality and “true love” between Romeo and Juliet.

Although Luhrmann's film initially drew little but harsh criticism from literary and film

critics alike—much as Zeffirelli's film did in 1968—its legitimacy seems well on its way to being established. To be sure, despite Luhrmann's initially shocking incorporation of MTV culture, popular rock music, and Hawaiian shirts in his film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, he displays an equally surprising depth of understanding for the play's complicated and rich themes of competing homoerotic and heterosexual love. Mercutio is Luhrmann's great triumph in *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, and the brilliance of this representation of homoerotic love should not soon be forgotten. With ever-changing youth cultures and the renowned adaptability of Shakespeare's plays, one can only look forward to the shocking interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* that will be brought to life in years to come.

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