

## Writing a Critical Commentary from *Romeo and Juliet*, Act III Scene I

Act III Scene I in *Romeo and Juliet* stands as a critical turning point in the play and contributes to the foreboding tragic deaths of the star-crossed lovers at the end. It contrasts profoundly with the romance and peacefulness of the previous evening in Act II. Act III provides a reminder that for all its prominence on love and passion, *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragic play in a virile world full of conflict and flaring tempers due to issues of male pride and honour.

In this significant scene, Tybalt and Mercutio both die and Romeo is banished from Verona under mitigating circumstances. The scene opens with Mercutio, Benvolio and 'men' in the streets of Verona. Benvolio urges them to depart since "[...] *the Capels are abroad./And if we meet we shall not scape a brawl./For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring*" (l. 2-4). Benvolio is concerned that they will meet the Capulets, realizing that a fight will surely occur due to the hot humid weather which causes people to be more passionate and quick-tempered: the 'dog days'. Indeed, they shortly encounter Tybalt from the Capulet family, who is seeking Romeo vengefully. Mercutio riles and taunts Tybalt until Romeo arrives. Romeo refuses to accept Tybalt's challenge to fight given that as he is now married to Juliet he considers himself also part-Capulet. Mercutio, who is angered by Romeo's refusal to fight, challenges and insults Tybalt once more. This causes them to begin duelling and Romeo attempts to separate them. However his intervention proves to be fatal for Mercutio who is mortally wounded. Mercutio curses both the Capulets and the Montagues and dies. Romeo who blames himself for Mercutio's death slays Tybalt in revenge and flees. After Benvolio has recounted the actions of both houses, the Prince banishes Romeo from Verona.

This scene elaborates the intertwining themes of love and hate in the play. Love is presented when Romeo refuses to accept Tybalt's challenge to fight. Since he is married to Juliet, he considers himself a part of the Capulets and is attempting to love her family as his own. Romeo's brotherly or spiritual love for Mercutio is also represented when he avenges Mercutio by killing Tybalt. However, hate is also a main theme present in this scene. Firstly, Tybalt wanting to slay Romeo for being a Montague and having stolen into the Capulet mansion demonstrates this profound hatred. Secondly, Lady Capulet reveals the depth of the overwhelming hatred between the rival families when she demands that Romeo must die for having killed Tybalt. This scene additionally exposes how any individual hindering the two families from their conflicts and revenge is simply ignored and therefore possibly hurt. Finally, it could also be argued that Mercutio portrays a slight aspect of hate when he curses both the Montague and the Capulet families: "*A plague a'both your houses*" (l. 82). He is blaming and cursing the rival families for their involvement in his death. This scene demonstrates moreover, that personal justice results in a never-ending spiral of revenge.

Act III Scene I similarly interprets the theme of Fate. Romeo declares furiously after killing Tybalt "*O, I am fortune's fool*" (l. 127). He seems to believe that Fate ordains everything and your entire life is predestined, which excludes free human choices. Romeo envisages that the tragic outcomes of the day's violence will influence the future. In this way, Shakespeare brings an even greater foreboding to light, reminding the audience that Romeo and Juliet's love is doomed, perhaps by an unconquerable, supreme force.

In my opinion, this situation could certainly occur in modern times as illustrated in the film directed by Baz Luhrmann in 1996.<sup>1</sup> This film modernizes the situation by portraying the two rival families as warring Mafia empires or gangs. This situation could also arise with two star-crossed lovers from different strongly religious families such as between Israeli and Palestinian families. In *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare transforms a realistic concept of ‘forbidden love’ into an incredible story of tragedy and romance, which could occur everywhere. This is the wonder of the Shakespearean language: it reaches the very roots of human emotions and is therefore characterized by its universality.

In Act III Scene I of the film of *Romeo + Juliet* by Baz Luhrmann the clothing of the characters is extremely important, not only does it reflect the modern setting of the play, but it also distinguishes the Montagues from the Capulets. Indeed, this enables the audience to swiftly identify members of each clan.

The Montagues wear colourful, surfer clothing illustrating the fact that their territory is the beach. This conveys the idea that the Montagues are on their ‘turf’ and the Capulets are the ones intruding.

In contrast, the Capulets wear more gangster-like clothing: leather jackets, piercings, tattoos and their whole attire is mostly black. Tybalt especially, resembles a wealthy Italian Mafia member. However, Mercutio does not wear either clothing style since he is neither a Capulet nor a Montague, even though he has befriended the Montagues. Therefore, Luhrmann has Mercutio dressed in a white shirt and black trousers. Similarly, Romeo is also an exception to the foremost clothing style: he wears a blue suit. This conveys that Romeo does not belong to either family since he is now married to Juliet: he has become one with his beloved wife. It emphasizes his new detachment from the families and his refusal to fight with Tybalt.

The contrasting costumes of the two families are combined with a powerful stagecraft, including powerful props contributing to the climax of the scene.

The tragic outcome is due to the interference of Romeo in the fight between Tybalt and Mercutio. As Romeo is holding Mercutio back, Tybalt takes advantage and kills Mercutio. In the film by Baz Luhrmann Mercutio throws Tybalt onto a pane of glass. As he is about to attack Tybalt again, who is incapacitated, Romeo intervenes and holds Mercutio back. During this short interval, Tybalt recuperates and uses the distraction to attack Mercutio with a broken shard of glass. In this way Mercutio is mortally wounded “*under Romeo’s arm*” (l. 94). The death of Tybalt in the original script is relatively subtle. However, in the film production by Baz Luhrmann this piece of action is extremely important and dramatized. In the film Romeo follows Tybalt in a car with an enraged look on his face and a constant roaring in the background both from Romeo’s screams of anguish and the cars. Tybalt loses control of the car and crashes, the car flipping over. Romeo and Tybalt both exit the car to reach the gun first, which is lying on the ground. Tybalt manages to grab it first and they exchange some words to rile each other up. In the film, Romeo repeats the words “*Either I, or thou or both must go with him*” (l. 120) three times, each time with a greater power and force. Romeo succeeds in seizing the gun and points it at Tybalt who is scrambling to get away. With an enraged look on his face again and a reverberating scream, he shoots Tybalt several times before Tybalt falls backwards

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<sup>1</sup> See “[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo\\_%2B\\_Juliet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_%2B_Juliet)” (last accessed on 28/10/14)

into the fountain, dead. Baz Luhrmann dramatizes and exaggerates this scene with the usage of frequent lighting and sound effects so as to virtually portray it as the climax of the entire film. For example, when Mercutio curses the Capulets and Montagues, the sky darkens, there is the roar of thunder and suddenly the wind blows a stand over. This emphasizes the fact that Mercutio has put a curse on both of the families, brings an even greater foreboding of doom and reminds us of the importance of the supernatural. The dramatization therefore renders the scene as the basis of all the complications that occur afterwards and indeed the catalyst of the tragic ending of the star-crossed lovers.

This scene reveals much about several of the characters in this play, namely Tybalt, Mercutio, Romeo and Benvolio.

Firstly, the audience receives a glimpse of Tybalt's vengeful personality before his untimely demise. Tybalt's character is full of arrogance, vanity and conceit; he believes himself to be better than everyone else. Tybalt immediately begins to insult Romeo as he feels his pride has been injured: "*thou art a villain*" (l. 54), "*Boy this shall not excuse the injuries/That thou hast done me*" (l. 59) and "*Thou wretched boy*" (l. 121). Through the usage of insulting and demeaning terms, Tybalt attempts to provoke Romeo into a fight. When Mercutio challenges Tybalt again, he promptly agrees and they begin to battle. This could be done to demonstrate Tybalt and Mercutio's bloodthirstiness and pugnacious personalities. In this scene there is a high level of testosterone and searing conflict occurring between Tybalt and Mercutio, and Tybalt and Romeo.

Mercutio embodies his name, which links to the word mercurial and contributes to the notion of his temperamental and reckless personality. He instantly jumps into the conflict and provokes Tybalt, wanting a fight to occur: "*Couple it with something, make it a word and a blow*" (l. 35) and "*[...] what dost thou make us minstrels? And thou/Make minstrels of us, look to hear nothing but discords*" (l. 40-41). Mercutio is disgusted by Romeo's relinquishment of the traditional masculine pugnacity and refusal to defend his male pride: "*O calm, dishonourable, vile submission*" (l. 66). For Mercutio, it is to go against the very core of what they are to abandon and refuse a challenge; it is a radical example of cowardice. Mercutio taunts Tybalt eminently during the scene, which brings about the acceleration of the violence and indeed the cause of his untimely death. In contrast with Romeo, Mercutio does not blame the tragic events on Fate but on the two warring families: "*A plague a'both your houses!*" (l. 82) and he curses the families vehemently during his death. Act III Scene I also portrays further depth in Mercutio's witty personality. Even on his deathbed he is making jokes: "*Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch*" (l. 85) and "*Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall/Find me a grave man*" (l. 89-90). This reveals Mercutio's manner of dealing with important or frightening things; by joking and attempting to not appear too affected. This scene reveals perhaps the insecurities in Mercutio's character. His desire to fight is motivated by his fear of losing face and becoming excluded by his companions, as well as his hatred of Tybalt, which seems to originate from deeper, older reasons. "*'Alla stoccata' carries it away./Tybalt you rat-catcher, will you walk*" and "*Good King of Cats, nothing but one of your nine lives*" display this deep-rooted hatred as Mercutio taunts and provokes Tybalt into a fight. In this scene we also see the Mercutio who is fiercely loyal and protective of his friends. This is especially well demonstrated in Baz Luhrmann's adaptation, where we see Mercutio bravely running into the fight to help Romeo who is not fighting back the vicious attacks of Tybalt. Mercutio is an interesting character that is extremely realistic with flaws and

strengths. This aids to portray him as a real person we can perhaps relate to and learn from. He overflows with wit, loyalty, imagination and he is particularly adept at uttering entertaining and humorous sexual double-meanings.

Romeo's refusal to fight and calm submission could also be a cause of the swift acceleration of the violence. His attempt to avoid conflict perhaps provokes and enrages Tybalt even more. At the beginning of the scene, Romeo's words are placating as he endeavours to calm Tybalt: "*Tybalt, the reason I hath to love thee/Doth much excuse the appertaining rage/To such a greeting. Villain am I none;/Therefore farewell, I see thou know'st me not. [...] And so, good Capulet, which name I tender/As dearly as mine own, be satisfied.* (l. 55-65) He wishes to make amends and reconcile with Tybalt who is now his kinsman due to his secret marriage to Juliet. As Mercutio and Tybalt begin to fight, Romeo again attempts to separate them and requests that Mercutio put his weapon away: "*Gentle Mercutio put thy rapier up/[...] for shame, forbear this outrage!/Tybalt, Mercutio, the Prince expressly hath/Forbid this bandying in Verona streets*" (l. 76-81). When he sees that his efforts are futile, he steps between them and thus occurs the tragic death of Mercutio. Romeo blames himself for Mercutio's death and fears that his love for Juliet has rendered him weak: "*[...] O sweet Juliet,/Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,/And in my temper softened valour's steel!* (l. 104-106). A vicious rage overtakes Romeo and he attacks Tybalt for killing his best friend and for Tybalt's insults. Romeo's words are no longer placating as he attacks Tybalt, they are grief-stricken and full of vengeance: "*[...] fire-eyed fury be my conduct now!/[...] Either thou, or I, or both must go with him (Mercutio)*" (l. 115-120). This scene reveals Romeo's strong loyalty for friends and perhaps that he is as rash and reckless as his best friends Mercutio. At first, he places his love for Juliet above petty fights, which then costs him the life of Mercutio. Due to this, he then places his rage and want for revenge above the repercussions which could occur with Juliet. Romeo is seen as love incarnated. Love is beauty and romance, but it is also tragedy and rash decisions.

William Shakespeare portrays Benvolio as the unsuccessful peacemaker of the play. His name embodies benevolence, honour and honesty, which is reflective of his character throughout the play. In the opening of Act III Scene I, Benvolio wishes to retire so as to avoid conflict with the Capulets: "*I pray thee, good Mercutio, let's retire, [...] the Capels are abroad,/And if we meet we shall not scape a brawl* (l. 2-4). His account of the tragic events to the Prince is accurate and unbiased, which he swears upon his life: "*This is the truth, or let Benvolio die*" (l. 166). However, the honourable, just and intellectual Benvolio in the original play is different to the Benvolio seen in the Baz Luhrmann's adaptation. In the film, Benvolio appears as a more backward, obtuse person who 'tags along'. This could be done to restrain his influence on the play and to emphasize his unsuccessfulness at solving and preventing the conflict between the Capulet and the Montague families.

As a conclusion, *Act III Scene I* in *Romeo and Juliet* truly initiates the tragedy of the play. It reveals the consequences of acting impulsively and alters the atmosphere and tension for the audience. This scene proceeds as a catalyst for the tragic disaster and would have been exceedingly sensational for the 'bawdy and boisterous groundlings' in William Shakespeare's time.