

## **Villains, clowns or misunderstood characters?**

### **A study of Tybalt and Mercutio, from play to movies**



*Harold Perrineau (Mercutio), Romeo + Juliet (Baz Luhrmann, 1996), 57'38 (3.1.35)*



*Michael York (Tybalt), Romeo and Juliet (Franco Zeffirelli, 1968), 27'39 (1.5.91)*

**SENNA Raphaëlle**

# Contents

## Introduction

### **Part I – A royal jester, a mercurial clown: who is Mercutio?**

A – The one who talks a lot: five centuries of analysis and interpretations

B – The Queen Mab tirade: Mercutio's bravura

### **Part II – Tybalt, honour and loyalty: the angry Prince of Cats**

A – Villain?

B – Or another victim?

### **Part III – A strange rivalry: Tybalt vs Mercutio**

A – Through each other's eyes

B – Death comes for everyone

## Conclusion

## References



*Mercutio, Tybalt (back; John Leguizamo), Benvolio (Dash Mihok), Romeo + Juliet, 59'59 (3.1.54)*

## Introduction:

What can one say about William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that has not already been said? The earliest quarto of the play appeared in 1597 and the earliest representations on stage probably during the autumn of 1596. As for most – if not all – of Shakespeare's plays, this one was also inspired by previous works, the most influential being indubitably Arthur Brooke's poem, the *Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, written in 1562. For the past five centuries, Shakespeare's play has been edited and re-edited, performed again and again, adapted, translated and studied in its every detail.

There is a meme used in the *Romeo and Juliet* fandom on the Internet, which could explain the diversity and complexity of the interpretations of the play. It goes like this:

[Person 1: "*Romeo and Juliet* is a love story."

Person 2: "*Romeo and Juliet* is not a love story. It is a tragedy about how young love is stupid and short-sighted."

Person 3: "*Romeo and Juliet* is indeed a tragedy, but the love between the two stars is not stupid or short-sighted - it is genuine and beautiful. The tragedy comes from the fact that the rivalry between the Capulets and the Montagues destabilizes their community and kills two innocent kids who loved each other."

Person 4: "Mercutio is gay."]

And indeed, the play is not easy to categorize and compartmentalize. Though the two eponymous characters are the focus of the general audience, and the most analysed aspect of the play, they are surrounded by a variety of other characters that should not be dismissed out of hand. The tragedy does come from the fact that the Capulet heiress and the Montague heir are not alone in the city. Verona and its people are an intrinsic part of the story.

Among the gaggle of characters who pose an obstacle to the young couple, two stand out and catch the eye. Tybalt is referred to in the play as Capulet's "kinsman". He is Juliet's cousin, the nephew of Lady Capulet, and the brother of Rosaline, the girl with whom Romeo is in love at the beginning of the play. Tybalt does not have a lot of lines, but he plays a crucial part in being the one who kills Mercutio, thus prompting the chain of events leading to Romeo's banishment and Juliet's fake-suicide. He is often perceived as the "villain" of the play, even though talking about a villain in *Romeo and Juliet* is absurd and reductive. As for Mercutio, he is the Prince's "kinsman" – nothing more is said about his relationship to the Prince, but modern adaptations of the play make him the Prince's nephew. Mercutio has one of the largest number

of speeches (lines) in the play, including the famous Queen Mab tirade. Though a neutral party in the feud between Capulets and Montagues, he is a friend of Romeo and Benvolio's, thus taking clear sides. His involvement in the feud, his behaviour and actions are another catalyst of the tragedy, yet he is also the embodiment of all the comedic aspects of the play. He is mostly known for his endless, often dirty, puns and jokes, thus appearing as the clown of the play.

Most movie adaptations miscast their Romeo and Juliet or cut huge parts of the text (yes, this is an allusion to the 1936 movie by George Cukor casting mature actors Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard to play 13-year-old Juliet and teen Romeo). Most movie adaptations only focus on the star-crossed lovers and often cut or misunderstand the roles of Tybalt and Mercutio. Therefore this essay will only focus on what are considered the two best movie adaptations of the play, Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 filmed adaptation and Baz Luhrmann's 1996 one. The goal is to shed another light on these two characters through a study of the text and an analysis of chosen scenes in the movies.



*Mercutio (John McEnery), Romeo and Juliet (1968), 18'04 (1.4.53)*

## Part I – A royal jester, a mercurial clown: who is Mercutio?

“True, I talk of dreams,  
Which are the children of an idle brain,  
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,  
Which is as thin of substance as the air [...]”  
(Mercutio, act 1, scene 4, 96-99)

Everybody loves Mercutio, but at the same time, he is people’s first choice. His name comes from “mercurial”, which in turn comes from “mercury”. In Roman mythology, Mercury is the equivalent of Hermes. He is the messenger god, the god of communication and eloquence, but also the god of thieves, trickery and luck. In chemistry, the element mercury is also called quicksilver – it is highly unstable, volatile and toxic. Thus, Mercutio is aptly named.

### A – The one who talks a lot: five centuries of analysis and interpretations

Mercutio’s weapon of choice is language. As Hamlet says, “Words, words, words” (*Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2). Mercutio loves to hear himself, he loves puns and jokes. He goes from prose to verse incessantly, showing his volatile and erratic temperament. He also strives on public admiration, and often makes a spectacle of himself to attract attention. In act 3, scene 1, when Benvolio asks him to take his quarrel with Tybalt somewhere more private, he answers:

“Men’s eyes were made to look, and let them gaze.  
I will not budge for no man’s pleasure.”

He has the arrogance and the confidence that come from being socially superior to the others, and a proclivity for spectacle and entertainment. Mercutio is the heart of the trio he forms with Romeo and Benvolio. Many scenes between the three friends begin with Mercutio in mid tirade or making puns. Not only is he their superior in the social hierarchy of Verona, but his clever, witty and complex speeches are what draw them to him. Baz Luhrmann saw this and acted on it. When Mercutio enters the Capulet party, he immediately takes the stage and showcases himself in his drag costume.



*Mercutio and dancers, Romeo + Juliet, 24'48 (roughly corresponding to 1.2.25)*

But there is something else beneath this veneer.

Mercutio's homosexuality has been the subject of many studies and papers. The oddity of Shakespeare's plays allows the directors to interpret the characters and the stage directions as they want. Indeed, there are very few stage directions in Shakespeare's plays – in fact, none by the Bard's hand – and the characters, though influenced by his research and influences, are Shakespeare's characters. Many have seen in Mercutio a self-projection of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was, debatably, queer himself – many of his sonnets were written for a man, including the famous sonnet 18 (“Shall I compare thee”) and the theory that he was bisexual is one of the most discussed among specialists. Thus analysing the homoerotic subtext of Mercutio opens to a new depth of interpretation of the character.

In the play, Mercutio's puns are often related to sex. After the Ball, Romeo hides away from his friends, and Benvolio and Mercutio look for him and mock him.

“If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark.

Now will he sit under a medlar tree,

And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit

As maids call medlars when they laugh alone.

O Romeo, that she were, O, that she were

An open-arse, thou a poperin pear!” (2.1.33)

The 1968 movie cut that scene altogether, while the 1996 one only keeps the last two lines, thus cutting short the elaborate pun. Indeed, the footnotes in the Arden Shakespeare (2012) indicate that “medlar” is slang for “female genitals”, a fruit also called in popular parlance “open-arse” and that “poperin pear” is a reference to male genitals. Stanley Wells in



*Shakespeare, Sex and Love* (2012) interprets that this is a reference to anal sex, or homosexual sex. The fact that Perrineau's Mercutio delivers that line torso bare, wearing only a leather jacket, a silver miniskirt, white wig and high heels, only adds to his queerness.



*Mercutio and Sampson (Jamie Kennedy), Romeo + Juliet, 35'13 (2.1)*

Zeffirelli does not downplay Mercutio's homosexuality either. Courtney Lehmann says in *Screen Adaptation: Romeo and Juliet: A close study of relationship between text and film* (2010) that "Zeffirelli plays up Mercutio's effeminacy" and the "homoerotic insinuation". Mercutio's relationship to Romeo in particular is analysed under that light. In the scene during which the Nurse comes to ask Romeo his decision, Mercutio mocks her, jests and ruffles her. John McEnery, following Zeffirelli's directions, modulates his voice, pitches it higher, then he caricatures her, having taken her veil. Zeffirelli directs his actor to say his lines in a certain way, or to walk in a certain way, to convey his homosexuality.



*Mercutio, Romeo and Juliet (1968), 56'54 (2.4.108)*



*Mercutio, Romeo and Juliet (1968), 58'25 (2.4.130)*

Nevertheless, to truly apprehend the depth and complexity of the character of Mercutio, one must look closely at the Queen Mab tirade.

### B – The Queen Mab tirade: Mercutio's bravura

One of the most famous tirades of *Romeo and Juliet* is said by Mercutio. As stated earlier, Mercutio talks a lot. The speech is composed of 42 and a half lines, in verse. Mercutio launches into the phantasmagorical recital of his dream after Romeo reveals that he had a dream, a dream that made him anxious about the Capulet party. The Queen Mab speech is also riddled with innuendo. But it is not just a long speech made of puns and funny, goofy, Mercutio-esque jokes. It has a dark underlying tone, it is an opening into Mercutio's psyche, his nihilism and his outlook on life and love in general. Romeo needs to step in at the end of the speech to calm Mercutio down, an interruption that prompts many directors to play Mercutio as being lost in his own mind, carried away by the violence of his emotions. Before Mercutio starts his tirade, Romeo and he had a duel of words to see which one could make the most blatant sexual metaphors. Of the three lines before the beginning of the speech, two are shared between the two friends, each saying one half of the line. That closeness, that relationship between Romeo and Mercutio is often explored in movie adaptations, whether through the way Mercutio delivers his speech or how Romeo comforts him.

“[ROMEO] I dreamt a dream tonight.

[MERCUTIO] And so did I.

[ROMEO] Well, what was yours?



[Mercutio] That dreamers often lie.

[ROMEO] In bed asleep while they do dream things true.

[MERCUTIO] O, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you.” (1.4.50)

Mercutio starts all fanciful and mocking Romeo, and then as he gets carried away, turns bitter and dark. The speech serves to show that Mercutio sees behind the surface, as in, he is not blinded by the ideals that all of the others held in high regards – Romeo’s love for poetry and romance, Tybalt’s obsession for honour, Benvolio’s unwavering loyalty. Mercutio is not just a funny jester spending his days exchanging banter and jokes with his friends. He is the Prince’s kinsman, he knows the ins and outs of the city, he knows the darkness lurking in the streets of Verona, and more than that, he conscientiously and willingly participates in that darkness by taking sides and getting involved in the feud. In a way, Mercutio keeps that feud alive – he is not alone in that, but he plays a role in keeping the hostility between Capulets and Montagues awake. The speech starts with a fairy tale, the description of Queen Mab in her exquisite ensemble, bringing dreams of love to lovers. But the fairy tale soon turns to nightmare when Mercutio goes on telling of the dreams of sex and death that Mab brings to maidens and soldiers. He starts with “She is the fairies’ midwife” and ends with “This is the hag”. He went beyond the veil to look at things how they truly are. Mercutio offers another view of reality, darker but more realistic; he paints the oppression of Verona, of the society as it is, and he tells Romeo in veiled words that his dream of love is “nothing”.

It is no coincidence that Shakespeare decided to use Mab for this speech about how things are not always as they seem. Mab is a Celtic Irish fairy, not well-known in literature before Shakespeare introduced her in the play, but after that she reappeared in many works of literature. Celtic fairies, the Fair Folk, are known for their dual nature, and their propensity to pranks and curses. If one comes across a fairy, one never knows if the fairy will help or harm. Celtic fairies are dangerous, wild and only follow their own rules (remember Puck in *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*).

In Zeffirelli, the Queen Mab scene starts at 17’15, with Mercutio asking Romeo why he is nervous about going to the Capulet’s Ball. The text is cut, everything between Benvolio’s lines “Come, knock and enter, and no sooner in / But every man betake to his legs” (1.4.33) and Mercutio’s “Why, may one ask?” (1.4.49) is gone. It ends at 20’50. In less than three minutes of screen-time, Mercutio does not speak the whole speech. A few lines are cut, but what remains is more than enough. His inner turmoil, the darkness of his thoughts, his volatility and his special bond with Romeo are all expressed in the way he acts and interacts with the other characters.

At the beginning of the speech he is surrounded by fire and people. This is when he is still joyful and playful, the jester, the entertainer.



*"O'er ladies lips, who straight on kisses dream" (1.4.74 – 18'31)*

But by the end of the speech, he is alone in the dark, in the middle of a great, empty square, alone in his world. The warm colours are gone, replaced by blacks, blues and greys.



*"This is the hag, when maids lie on their back" (1.4.92 – 19'38)*

Then Romeo intervenes to calm Mercutio down, and the way the two characters huddle close together, as if they were the only ones in that square, hints at an intimate, close relationship. Romeo cradles Mercutio's face in his palm, his hands slide down to his neck, and he lowers his voice, talking in comforting, soothing tones.



*"Thou talk'st of nothing" (1.4.96 – 20'14)*

Then Mercutio lets his head fall forward, until his forehead is pressed to Romeo's, he seems to come down from his high and take comfort in Romeo's presence.



*"True, I talk of dreams" (1.4.96 – 20'18)*

Baz Luhrmann takes another approach to the scene. The speech itself starts at 20'53 and ends at 22'56, though the scene is longer, starting with Mercutio arriving with the invitations to the Capulet party. The scene takes place in an abandoned movie theatre, in ruins. Though it is not in *Romeo and Juliet* that the line is spoken, "All the world's a stage" ("and all the men and women merely players", act 2 scene 7) from *As You Like It* is often associated with

Mercutio. Thus the setting for the Queen Mab speech is highly symbolic. Mercutio is playing a role, he wears a mask, a mask that is asked of him by his place in society. Therefore the Queen Mab speech is his way of shedding away his mask and revealing his true nature behind the laughs and the puns.



*Sycamore Grove – Balthazar, Sampson, Mercutio, Romeo – 19'48 (beginning of 1.4)*

Then Mercutio shows a pill to Romeo – a pill which represents what Queen Mab really is: an escape from reality through drugs. What Mercutio is saying is that everything is a fantasy – even love.



*“And then they dream of love” (1.4.71 – 21'39) – The Queen Mab pill*

While at the beginning of the speech the last notes of the song “Young Hearts Run Free” by Kim Mazelle can be heard, the music changes during the speech. The rhythm picks up, the tone changes as Mercutio gets angrier and more agitated. Here too, he starts the speech in jest, and ends bitter and aggravated. The last line is yelled across the half-deserted amusement park, the music stops with Mercutio shouting “This is she”, and the silence is immediately broken up

by the fireworks. It is quite symbolical of Mercutio's temperament, his volatility and mercuriality.



*"This is she" (1.4.95 – 22'10) – Romeo and Benvolio in the background*

Some lines are also cut off from the text, but every adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* that wants to really show the depth and complexity of the situation, of Verona's toxicity and how much the characters are stuck in their roles (even when, like Mercutio, they are aware of these chains) cannot cut off entirely the Queen Mab speech. Its dramatic function is not just to fill the time before Romeo meets Juliet, but to add another layer to the stage.

Thus Mercutio is a primordial character, whose role is to show the audience that not everything is all black or all white. Mercutio is not just the jester, the clown who makes pun after pun and relishes in innuendo and mockery. He has a darkness within him, an anger that expresses itself in this passage of bravura. His erratic temper, his relationship to other characters, his more than probable queerness make him a character impossible to define.

In this, he is not the only one. Mercutio without Tybalt would not be the same Mercutio. But who is Tybalt?



## Part II - Tybalt, honour and loyalty: the angry Prince of Cats

“Patience perforce with wilful choler meeting  
Makes my flesh tremble in their different greeting.

I will withdraw, but this intrusion shall,  
Now seeming sweet, convert to bitt’rest gall”

(Tybalt, act 1 scene 5, 88-91)

A common misconception is to make Tybalt the villain of the play. Many think that Tybalt is only a murderer, a violent, aggressive fighter who relish in the feud and lives for the fights with the Montagues. Tybalt does not have that many lines, and yet his role is crucial to the plot of the tragedy. His mere presence in the play is more important than the number of lines he speaks. His rage, his fiery countenance, his impatience make him dangerous – but his respect of the social hierarchy, his attachment to questions of honour and loyalty show another side of him.

### A – Villain?

Tybalt is skilled with a sword. Indeed, Tybalt’s first appearance in the play is sword in hand. He is the second main character to appear, after Benvolio, and his very first course of action is to insult and seek a fight. The same way Mercutio’s weapon is words, Tybalt’s is his skills with a sword.

“What, are thou drawn among these heartless hinds?

[Draws.] Turn thee, Benvolio, look upon thy death.” (1.1.64)

Tybalt itches for a fight. He is confrontational, hot-tempered, and as he says himself, full of hatred. While Benvolio is trying to calm down the crowds of Capulets, Montagues and subjects of Verona, and to prevent an all-out civil brawl in the streets, Tybalt sneers at Benvolio, calls him a coward and accuses him of meddling with people that are lower than him in society.

His first appearance in Zeffirelli clearly denotes the pleasure he takes in catching Benvolio in a precarious situation, and in showing his skills and his superiority. His first word “What” is drawn out, a drawl dripping with sarcasm and acid.



*“What?” (1.1.64 – 3’35)*

His smirk falls off when Benvolio says the word “peace”, and the change in his demeanour is immediate. Anger dawns on his face and his thirst for a fight becomes apparent.



*“I hate the word” (1.1.68 – 3’54)*

Tybalt is already stealing the scene. His mannerisms, his voice and his facial expressions are all thought through in their smallest details.

However, Tybalt is not a blood-thirsty, violent killer, but a youngster looking for some action. His intent is not to kill, but only, in a way, to have fun. His blows do not land – they are not even aimed at his opponents. Later in the scene (Zeffirelli cuts this passage), Benvolio recounts the brawl to Lord Montague, and says this:

“The fiery Tybalt, with his sword prepared,

Which, as he breathed defiance to my ears,  
He swung about his head and cut the winds” (Benvolio, 1.1.107)

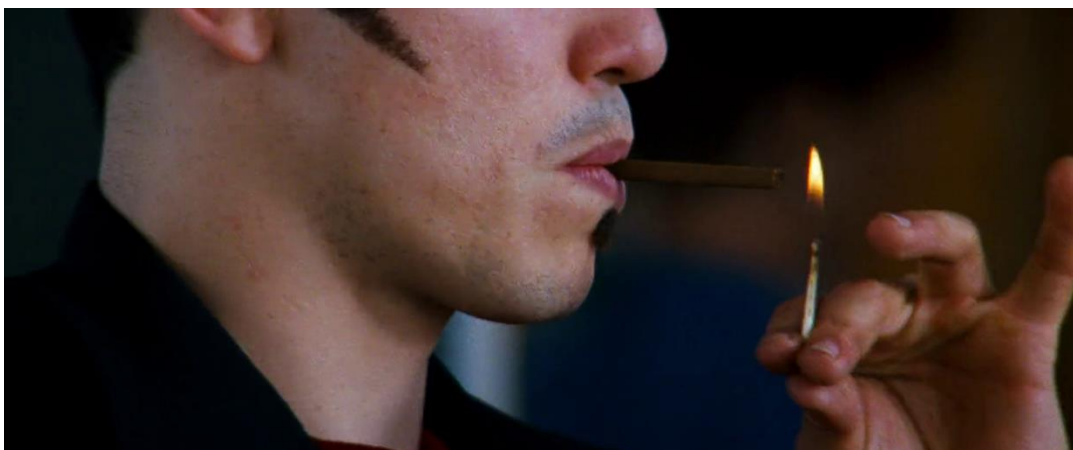
The brawl as Zeffirelli depicts it is a messy, noisy thing, Capulets and Montagues fighting each other not with the intent to harm or kill, but simply to fight. Of course, if Tybalt had not shown up at the scene, maybe Benvolio would have succeeded at keeping the peace.

While Zeffirelli adopts a solemn tone for the brawl scene, very serious and first degree, Luhrmann goes all the way with the absurdity of this first scene. The whole “Do you bite your thumb at us?” exchange between the servants is indeed totally absurd and comedic, and not even Benvolio’s intervention makes it look more serious. Until Tybalt appears. His arrival is announced by the element that characterizes him: fire.”



*Seconds before Tybalt’s first appearance (5’47)*

And when Tybalt appears on screen, he does exactly what the tin says: he adds fuel to the fire – literally. The brawl here happens in a gas station, where gallons of oil are exposed. Tybalt lights a match in this very volatile environment, putting everyone at risk of a fire, and then taunts Benvolio until he gets the fight he seeks.



*First glance at Tybalt (5’50)*

Immediately after the first gun shot, comedy steals back the scene. Tybalt becomes just as over-the-top and extra as the other characters; he pirouettes, he dives, he jumps – almost as if the fight is choreographed and he is taking part in a very elaborate dance-fight. He is turned into ridicule and his dramatic behaviour is made to be laughed at.



*This is straight up from an action movie (7'00)*

Clearly, Tybalt's first scene is not meant to paint him in a good light in the eyes of the audience. He is violent, eager for a fight, he shows a certain superiority complex and he does not care for anyone else – but he is also a figure of ridicule, melodramatic and over the top. His guns denote his character; his modified 9mm Taurus Rapier is sleek and light, making it easier for him to fight with flourish and finesse, the weapon of a gentleman. It is not a weapon meant for street fights, but a weapon made for someone who was extensively trained to protect the honour of his family.

### B – Or another victim?

There is something else already in these two lines, the first he speaks: his attention to ranks and social value, his obsession with the system of Verona. This view of the social ladder mainly applies to Romeo. Though Romeo is nobility, the heir of the Montague, Tybalt hates him and considers himself superior. Tybalt keeps calling Romeo a “villain”, even goes as far as to call him a “slave” (1.5.54). That Romeo is showing himself at the Capulet's ball is an insult to Tybalt. But the only reason Tybalt considers it an insult is because of the animosity between the two families. Indeed, Tybalt is inordinately loyal to the Capulet family. During the Ball scene, he does not speak of himself, but of the Capulets.

“What, dares the slave

Come hither, covered with an antic face,

To fleer and scorn at *our* solemnity?” (1.5.54-56)

He speaks of his “kin”, of the Capulet’s “foe”. His rivalry with Romeo is not entirely personal. It is born from the feud, it comes from the role each of them occupies in the dispute. Yet Tybalt seems to be the only one who gives so much attention to this question of rivalry. When he tries to get his uncle Lord Capulet to see the insult that is allowing Romeo to stay, Capulet answers that Romeo has done nothing wrong, and in the contrary seems to be a good gentleman, “a virtuous and well-governed youth”. Tybalt tries to insist, and ends up being humiliated and put back in his place by the master of the house. Capulet shows who is in charge. The words he uses are words used to tame a feral animal, someone who could explode at any moment and needs to be treated with caution, yet reminded of their place: “content thee”, “be patient”.

“I would not for the wealth of all this town  
Here in my house do him disparagement.  
Therefore be patient, take no note of him.  
It is my will, the which if thou respect,  
Show a fair presence and put off these frowns,  
An ill-beseeming semblance for a feast.” (Capulet, 1.5.69-73)

At first Capulet’s rebuke is polite and he does not order around Tybalt immediately. But as Tybalt insists and makes a nuisance of himself, Capulet grows agitated and meaner. He calls Tybalt a “goodman boy”, a double insult (according to the Arden footnotes) regarding Tybalt’s lower rank in the family and his disrespect of guests and his elders, then a “saucy boy”, meaning “an impudent fellow”, and finally a “princox”, perhaps the harshest insult: Capulet is calling Tybalt an “insolent pup”. All of this only serves to remind the audience that Tybalt does not have any real power. In the streets, he may seem to be in charge, and even yielding some power due to his talent with a sword, but in the house, as Capulet reminds him, he is nobody.

The realisation that Tybalt is perhaps not all that he seems to be sheds another light on his behaviour on the streets and towards the Montagues. One may see his violence and his anger towards the enemy of his family as an outlet for the real anger he feels, the one directed at his family, but that he cannot express for fear of being punished or disavowed. The threat of Capulet punishing Tybalt for his insolence is thinly veiled in Capulet’s speech:

“This trick may chance to scathe you, I know what.  
You must contrary me! – Marry, ‘tis time” (Capulet, 1.5.83-84)



Tybalt complies, but his last lines in the scene are prophetic – because Capulet gives him an order, he will let Romeo go, but as soon as he is free, his vengeance will not wait.

The scene in Zeffirelli's adaptation conveys all the layers of Tybalt's humiliation. Michael York makes a splendid Tybalt, whose emotions are plainly written on his face. Zeffirelli rewrites the scene and gives to Lady Capulet the last three lines of Capulet's speech. After Capulet starts yelling at Tybalt, Lady Capulet intervenes, calls Tybalt a "princox", orders him to stay quiet "or" and then hisses at her husband "For shame, I'll make you quiet". The threat does not come from Capulet himself, but from his wife, which makes it even more worrying. Tybalt's entire demeanour changes after that exchange, he looks submissive, head hanging low, and following his aunt without protest. The proud fighter who appeared in the first scene is not here anymore, instead there is a petulant child, whining to the adults about his enemy being in the house.



*"I would not for the wealth of all this town" – (1.5.68 – 26'12)*

Tybalt's outrage is cut short by Capulet's nonchalance. While he praises Romeo's qualities, Tybalt tries to interject and protests against what he deems to be "a shame". A whole array of emotions goes through his face as he realises his protests are taking him in the wrong direction.



*“You are a saucy boy” (1.5.82 – 27’59)*

Tybalt’s fear can clearly be seen on his face. Capulet’s anger is not only verbal, it also becomes physical – Capulet pushes Tybalt against a wall and towers over him, showing his superiority and reminding Tybalt that he holds the power against him. This fact becomes even clearer in the next shot.



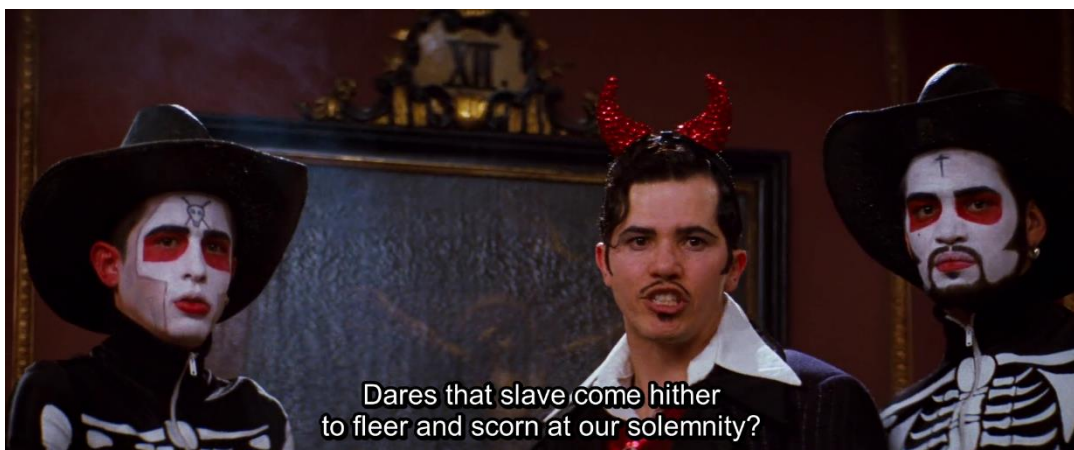
*“He shall be endured” (1.5.75 – 28’07)*

Zeffirelli rearranges the text to show the growing anger of Capulet and fear of Tybalt. But Tybalt only submits when Lady Capulet intervenes.



*“For shame, I’ll make you quiet” – (1.5.86-87 – 28’38)*

Luhrmann cuts most of the scene between Tybalt and Capulet to focus on Romeo and Juliet’s first meeting, but what he keeps is enough to show the same level of abuse and the same maelstrom of emotions on Tybalt’s face. While Romeo is busy adoringly gazing at Juliet, Tybalt, who recognized him, storms towards him, with the intention to either kill him on the spot or throw him out of the house. He is intercepted by Capulet, who is obviously drunk and tells him to forget about Romeo. Tybalt does not comply, which prompts Capulet to slap him and then send him away.



*1.5.54 and 56 – 28’01*

At first, Tybalt seems in control. He is flanked by two of his men, and his Devil outfit makes him look ... devilish. He seems above the situation, having eyes everywhere and in charge of the Party. It quickly becomes clear that it is just a façade.

But then Capulet takes a hold of him and Tybalt seems to deflate. Capulet holds him to his chest by his shoulders, effectively keeping him from going anywhere, and the passion and anger that were on Tybalt's face mere seconds before turn into anguish and the whining protests of a child.



*Tybalt and Capulet (1.5.64 – 28'21)*

Tybalt protests, claims that he “shall not endure him”, to which Capulet's face turns stern and angry, and he slaps him. After he slaps him, Capulet drives Tybalt away, both verbally by repeating “Go to!” multiple times and physically by advancing on him threateningly, until Tybalt relents, looking shocked and afraid, like a child that has been scolded. The scene then cuts to Juliet dancing with Paris, and the focus comes back on Tybalt at the very end, when Romeo is leaving with his crew, looking longingly at Juliet who is staring back at him from a window. Tybalt seems to have recovered from the abuse, though his anger and his solemn promise that this is not over indicate that he shall not forget what Romeo – indirectly – put him through.



*1.5.90-91 – 34'52*

By putting those lines after Romeo and Juliet's meeting, Luhrmann gives an explanation to Tybalt's actions. It has been theorized that Tybalt heard the beginning of the exchange between the two lovers, adding to his idea of a scorned honour.

Both directors show Tybalt as being a braggart. Tybalt is not the villain that he has been painted to be. Although he is indeed hot-tempered, prone to anger and violence, and eager to fight for the honour of the family, he is only trying to protect his place in the city, in the streets, and among the Capulets. He presents himself as more than he really is. He is just as much a victim of Verona's toxicity, vulnerable to the system in place. He has no real power; he is defenceless against his aunt and uncle, which makes him lash out at those who in turn are defenceless against him. This is where Mercutio comes back in the picture: Mercutio is not defenceless against Tybalt. And that is why their relationship is so explosive.



### Part III - A strange rivalry: Tybalt vs Mercutio

In the introduction to the second Arden Shakespeare edition of *Romeo and Juliet* (2009), the editor and scholar Brian Gibbons writes:

“Mercutio is drawn magnetically to Tybalt as is Romeo to Juliet; his diversion of quarrel to himself is ironically comparable to a rival lover’s act of seduction. Indeed, to kill Tybalt seems a pleasure in itself, an honourable duty, is to emulate Romeo, and perhaps, more obscurely, satisfies envy of Romeo’s dedication to love. So, for Mercutio, Romeo’s disastrous intervention in the duel is precisely expressive of the malevolent power of Venus (though he never learns of Romeo’s marriage) and Romeo’s impulse for peace strikes him as unbearably ironic, agonizingly absurd. Their mutual incomprehension and mutual affection are given balletic clarity in the fatal action. Mercutio’s exultant dance as he fights Tybalt is broken by his friend’s dream-guided intervention; the moment’s hesitation gives death its chance. In an instant, the whole course of the play alters decisively, and the scene which began with jesting about quarrelling ends with the solemn bearing of a dead body on the stage.”

This encompasses a lot of themes concerning the kind of relation Tybalt and Mercutio share in general, and the way the Duel unrolls in particular. A lot of these themes find their roots in the specific characteristics of both characters. Their personalities, beliefs and views of the world end up clashing and the resulting fight is the turning point of the play. Up until the Duel, the play was more axed towards comedy than tragedy, but the fire that Mercutio and Tybalt alight by meeting tips the play towards tragedy. But who are they to each other, really? Why is there such an animosity? Could it have gone any other way?

#### A – Through each other’s eyes

Long before the Duel (in the text – not in the diegetic chronology of the events), Mercutio is already ranting about Tybalt. Pressed by Benvolio, who is worried after discovering that Tybalt challenged Romeo, he launches into a description of the kind of man Tybalt is. While at first glance it may look like a straightforward portrait, but as with all of Mercutio’s speeches, this one is brimming with symbolism and hidden messages.

It may seem like Mercutio is complimenting Tybalt on his skills with a sword. But he is actually mocking the fact that Tybalt only knows to fight by the books. He accuses him of being “a duellist”, something that he repeats twice, and a concept that is new at the time of the writing

of the play. Mercutio is poking fun at this new, affected concept. Every word Mercutio speaks about Tybalt is in reality an insult, flaunting how ridiculous Tybalt is, starting with the nickname “Prince of Cats”. The nickname only appears one more time in the play, act 3 scene 1, this time being “King of Cats”. Despite the apparent elegance of the title, Mercutio means it as an insult. One of the theory behind why that is an insult is that in Italian, “cazzo” (plural “cazzi”), close to the English “Cats”, means “cock”. Thus Mercutio is calling Tybalt the “King of Dicks”. The “gentleman of the very first house” is another insult of Tybalt’s less than glorious pedigree – firstly by implying that Tybalt is not really a gentleman, and secondly by suggesting that Tybalt learned how to fight in a mere fencing school, while Mercutio received a higher education. Mercutio’s sarcasm shines in the line “a very good blade, a very tall man, a very good whore” – “very” here is used in the sense of “some”, meaning that Tybalt is not that good – in anything. Mercutio is unleashing a torrent of insults against Tybalt, taking apart every single aspect of the Capulet – his rank, his skills, his honour.

Zeffirelli cuts out all of this speech in his version, only keeping the first line, “More than Prince of Cats”.



*“More than Prince of Cats” (2.4 – 54’36)*

As for Luhrmann, he only keeps the first part of the speech and cuts out from “a very good blade”. The scene is thus more focused on Tybalt’s skills with a sword than his overall person. Mercutio mimes the fencing moves as he enumerates them, followed by Benvolio, which shows that mocking Tybalt is a recurrent activity of the two friends. In passing, Mercutio also shows his virtuosity with a gun, executing the moves perfectly. Mercutio’s gun is different from Tybalt’s, heavier and thicker, the weapon of someone of high birth who does not need to fight his battles himself but was nonetheless thoroughly trained.



*"A duellist, a gentleman of the very first house" (2.4 – 51'18)*

The music is reminiscent of that of western movies, where cowboys make fancy moves with their guns to impress their enemies/love interests. Mercutio's tone of voice carries his sarcasm.

On the other hand, Tybalt's first interaction with Mercutio is quite respectful and unlike anything we've seen of Tybalt yet. He is wary, his behaviour is cautious and the way he addresses both Mercutio and Benvolio, but Mercutio mainly, he is sensible and shows his understanding of his station. He is, surprisingly, not looking for a fight with Mercutio and Benvolio. His only target is Romeo. He starts by calling them "Gentlemen" and wishing them a "good-e'en". He uses "you" and "sir" to address Mercutio, marks of respect of his superiority. He does not want to fight Mercutio at first, an argument that proves that Tybalt did not kill him voluntarily. He talks in iambic blank verse, a sign of planned speech instead of impulsivity. His only loss of control happens after Mercutio taunts and provokes him. Mercutio has two lines of attack against Tybalt: insulting his manliness and insulting his honour. "Make it a word and a blow" has a clear homoerotic subtext, while "Could you not take some occasion without giving?" means simply that Mercutio is calling Tybalt a coward. Tybalt retaliates with a homosexual taunt of his own, "consort", implying an affair between Mercutio and Romeo, which enrages Mercutio – some have theorised that he indeed had feelings for Romeo, but that they were unrequited, thus hitting him where it hurts. Mercutio again responds with promises of violence and insults of cowardice. This cautious behaviour is quite unexpected from Tybalt, with regards to his other two scenes, where he gets carried away by his emotions, yet it makes sense. Tybalt was there when the Prince said that another fight would be severely punished, and then he was humiliated by his uncle because of his wish to fight the Montagues, thus despite his rage he exercises caution and restraint in order to not make the situation escalate anymore.

Zeffirelli keeps the entirety of the text – for once – thus allowing Michael York to play another side of Tybalt, less snarky, less feral, but more compromising and restrained. Mercutio

on the other hand is being as much of a clown as he can be, taking a bath entirely clothed in a fountain, pitching his voice higher and delivering line after line of sass with a proud smile. Even Tybalt's facial expressions are carefully controlled while Mercutio is freewheeling.



*"Gentlemen, good-e'en, a word with one of you" (3.1.37 – 1'09"44)*



*"Make it a word and a blow" (3.1 – 1'09"58)*

Tybalt only reacts after Mercutio's "Zounds, 'consort'!" line. His amenable smile falls off his face and he rises up from where he had been sitting on the edge of the fountain. Only the quick intervention of Benvolio keeps him from making Mercutio regret his words on the spot.

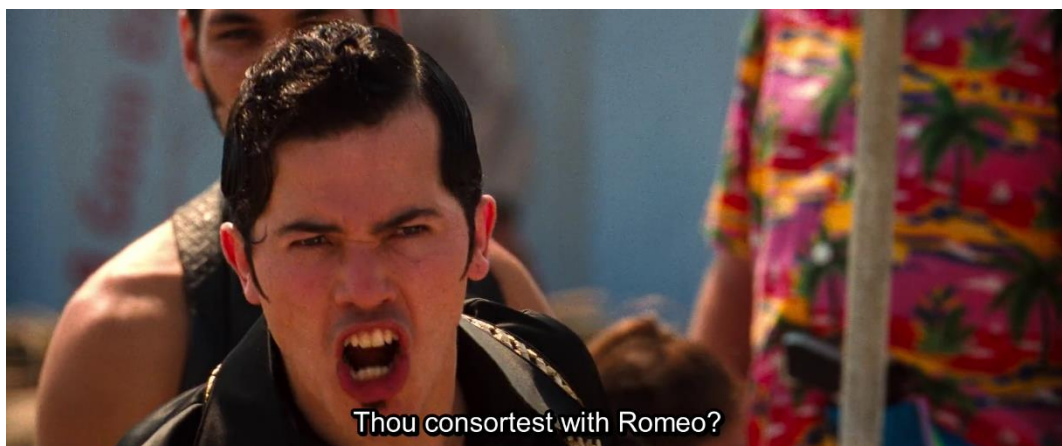
Zeffirelli chooses to keep the tone light all throughout the scene. He makes it an exuberant affair, foolish and merry. Luhrmann goes back and forth between tension and lightness – a representation of both Mercutio's volatility and Tybalt's short fuse. The puns land more



fiercely, Mercutio's body language makes them cruder, while Tybalt's restraint is barely hanging by a thread, the tension showing in his face. The arrival of the Capulets is announced by the picking-up of the music, the cords being more piercing and the percussions taking on an ominous note, indicating the change in the atmosphere of the scene. Tybalt and his goons' slow progression towards Mercutio and his posse highlights the tension existing between the two gangs. Mercutio amps up his homoerotic behaviour while Tybalt barely keeps his anger at bay. But when Tybalt says the word "consort", Mercutio's playfulness turns into anger. He is the one who goes after Tybalt, while Tybalt backs away and Benvolio tries to keep them separated. Tybalt clearly does not want the fight to become physical with Mercutio, seeming to prefer the banter.



*Mercutio taunts Tybalt by showing his behind (3.1 – 59'23)*



*Tybalt loses control (3.1 – 59'28)*

At that point, Mercutio is ready to fight anybody, Tybalt is trying to stay away from Mercutio and Benvolio is trying to keep the peace. Benvolio's use of verse echoes the Prince's declaration in act 1 scene 1, when he brings back peace in the streets of Verona by delivering a powerful speech about the risks Capulets and Montagues incur if they partake in a fight another



time. Benvolio is taking on the mantle of peace-keeper, despite the fact that Mercutio, the Prince's kinsman himself, is looking to break the fragile peace.

This is when Romeo makes his entrance, after his secret wedding to Juliet.

### B - Death comes for everyone

The Duel is the tipping point of the play. The fragile balance that was kept all throughout the plot up until this point is broken and discarded. While the prologue says that the feud is ancient and has been reawakened with a new rage, the Prince's warning speech in act 1 scene 1 implies that the fights had not yet been deadly – nobody has died because of the feud. Mercutio's death and Romeo's revenge are a game-changer. If not for Romeo's decision to not answer the challenge, leading to Mercutio and Tybalt taking arms against each other, the outcome of the whole play could have been very different.

Tybalt did not kill Mercutio on purpose. Mercutio was not his target, and Tybalt was keenly aware of the consequences if anything dire should happen. The aim of the duel is only to draw blood, to injure – this is the way to restore one's scorned honour. But Romeo is now Tybalt's kinsman by his marriage to Juliet, and thus refuses to fight. Tybalt tries to back him into drawing his sword, insulting him, calling him a "boy" and a "villain", to which Romeo answers with words of affection and tenderness. Here Mercutio shows a side of him he had not given to see previously: his fierce loyalty to his friends and his acute sense of honour. If Romeo shall not respond to Tybalt's insults, more than that, if Romeo persists in bowing his head to Tybalt, then Mercutio will fight instead of his friend.

Unfortunately, Romeo cannot stay away. Mercutio and Tybalt's intents are not to kill each other. Mercutio calls Tybalt by his nickname, "Prince of Cats", and states that he only wants to take one of his nine lives – thus leaving him alive. Tybalt does not want to fight Mercutio at first – only after multiple taunts and Romeo's ducking out does he respond to Mercutio and agree to the fight. It is because Romeo steps between them two that Tybalt miscalculates his move and mortally wounds Mercutio – that was not planned.

The fact that Tybalt comes back after Mercutio dies can be interpreted in various ways – Shakespeare did not leave any stage directions – but in regard to what has been said previously, it is only logical to think that he is in shock, does not believe that Mercutio is actually dead, and that he is now a murderer. Tybalt would not come back if he had purposefully killed Mercutio – he knows the Prince's edict, what the price to pay for murder is, even more so the murder of one of the Prince's kinsman. Romeo beats him easily, even though it has been repeated in the play that Tybalt is a skilled swordsmanship. Had Tybalt murdered Mercutio voluntarily, he would not have spared Romeo. One could interpret his weakened state as the result of shock, or an unwillingness to live as a murderer.

Courtney Lehmann notes in *Screen Adaptations* that “Zeffirelli makes it clear that when the fun and the games turn deadly, Michael York’s Tybalt is utterly horrified at the sight of Mercutio’s blood on his sword”. Indeed, the Duel in the 1968 movie is acted like a farce, a comedy. All the characters are laughing – these are just young, exuberant young men fooling around. Romeo accepts the mockery of the Capulet clan, and Tybalt walks away – truly walks away – after laughing a moment at Romeo. Tybalt even splashes Mercutio before turning around.



*Tybalt laughing at Romeo, Romeo accepting the mockery and the Capulets walking away (1'12"21)*

But Mercutio cannot let it go, despite Romeo’s good nature, Benvolio’s warnings and Tybalt being already halfway through the square. He, unlike the others, is not laughing. On the contrary, he looks rather angry and ready for a fight.



*“Good King of Cats, nothing but one of your nine lives” (3.1 – 1'12"35)*

Benvolio and Romeo try to stop Mercutio. Tybalt is still walking away surrounded by his men. But Mercutio does not abandon the issue. He draws his sword and slides it along Tybalt's neck, finally drawing a reaction. As soon as Tybalt draws too, the tone goes back to being merry. All the participants of the scene gather round Tybalt and Mercutio, it all seems like a joyous affair. Both fighters flaunt their best moves to impress the crowd. Only Romeo is still worried and fretful.



*"Come, sir, your passado" (Mercutio, 3.1.84 – 1'13"26)*

It is all in good fun – they joke around, they laugh, they poke fun at each other, they do not fight to kill or even to maim, but to enjoy themselves, they shake hands, they are being fair play - until Romeo gets in between.



*Shock, horror, incredulity – that was not what Tybalt wanted (1'15"40)*

The tone is utterly and completely different in *Romeo + Juliet*. No jokes. No laughter. Even the elements tune themselves to the tragedy that is taking place on the beach, in the theatre in ruins – the tempest takes in intensity as the scene advances. The music underlines the sadness of the moment. Tybalt does not take Romeo's refusal easily. Instead, he goes after the retreating form of his enemy and starts beating him with his fists and his feet. It is bleeding, pleading and almost crying that Romeo begs Tybalt to understand that he cannot fight him.



*Romeo refuses to fight (3.1.71 – 1'02"21)*

Mercutio's face is set in stone. He watches Romeo grovel at Tybalt's feet with rising disgust and fury. He cannot accept how the situation is unravelling. Neither his loyalty nor his honour can stomach this scene.



*Mercutio loses his cool (3.1.72 – 1'02"25)*

As for Tybalt, he looks ill at ease, not knowing how to react to Romeo's submission, except in getting more violent. The music picks up as Tybalt starts hitting Romeo more and more.





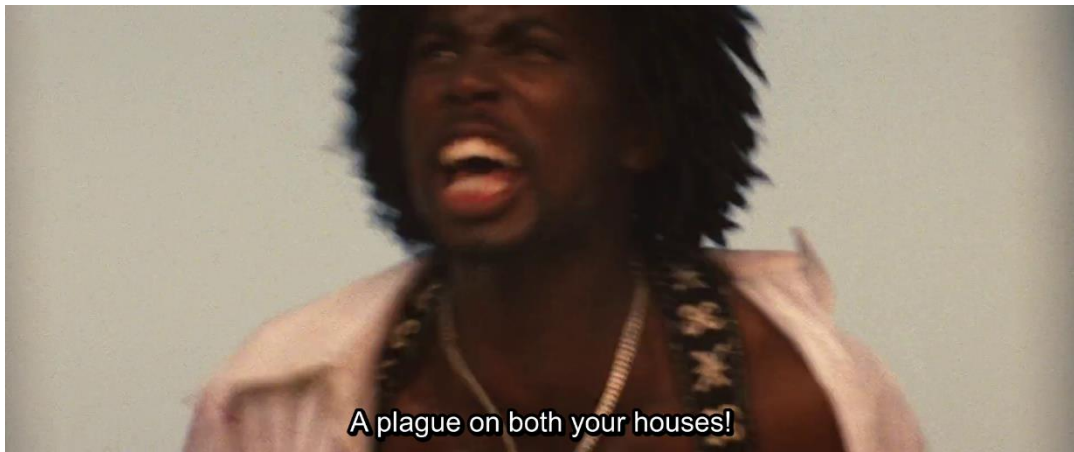
*Tybalt listening to Romeo's pleas (3.1.65-70 – 1'02"18)*

The fight between Tybalt and Mercutio is a fistfight – no guns, no knives, no weapon of any kind but their bare fists – until Mercutio throws Tybalt on a broken glass panel. There is a slight pause at that moment, then the scene resumes in slow motion. Romeo, bleeding, gets back on his feet. Tybalt, now just as injured, is still laying on the glass, looking dazed. Mercutio, his eyes crazed, seemingly lost in his rage, picks up a piece of wood and charges at Tybalt. Romeo jumps in, trying to stop Mercutio, and effectively bringing him back to his senses. At this point, it gets confusing – Luhrmann does not show who the responsibility lies with. Tybalt picks up a piece of glass, Mercutio pushes Romeo away, and Tybalt stabs Mercutio. Mercutio dies as he lived, cracking jokes at his existence and his mortality and occupying centre stage.



*Mercutio knowing he is about to die (3.1 – 1'04"12)*

The sky and the lightning of the scene turn grey as he dies, and his final premonition, a curse, echoes on the beach. His anger is tinted with desperation when he understands that he is done for.



*A curse repeated three times (3.1 – 1'04''42)*

Although in a way it looks like Tybalt slashed Mercutio on purpose, his face during Mercutio's last lines shows conflict, shock, and maybe even regrets – the blow was not meant to be deadly. The intensity of his death at Romeo's hands is violent. The scene is cut in two, with Tybalt running away and Romeo chasing him in a car, causing a car crash and confronting Tybalt in the middle of the city, on the stairs of the main city square.



*Tybalt realising that Mercutio is about to die (3.1 – 1'04''49)*

Romeo's final speech to Tybalt is cut in half. He says:

"Mercutio's soul

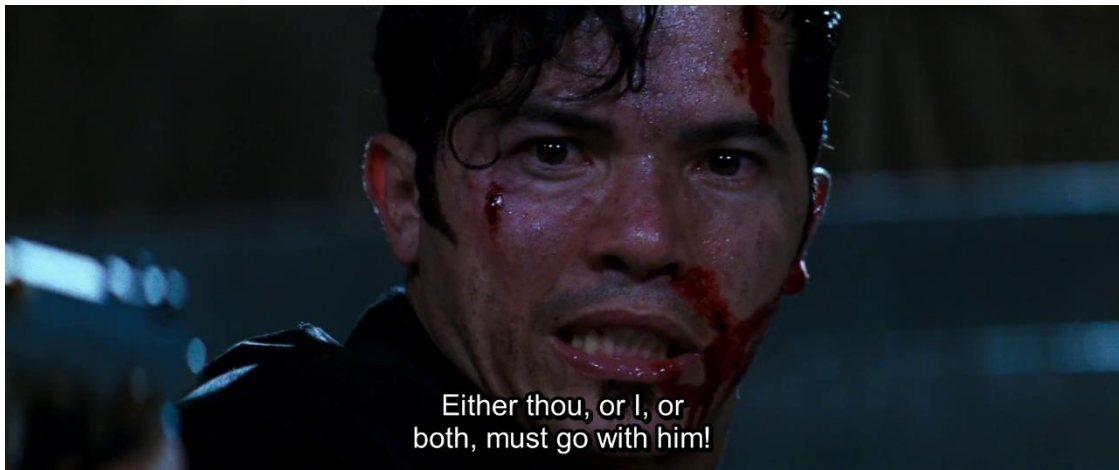
Is but a little way above our heads,

Staying for thine to keep him company.

Either thou or I, or both, must go with him."

He repeats the last line three times, each more intensely than before, keeping Tybalt's gun trained on his forehead. Tybalt then hesitates, drops the gun and falls back. Romeo picks up the gun and empties it in Tybalt.





*Romeo, 3.1.131 – 1'08"55*



*Death of Tybalt – 1'09"14*

We are halfway through the play, more or less halfway through the movies, and Romeo has just committed the irreparable. By avenging Mercutio's death, he murders Tybalt in a fit of rage, thus violating the Prince's edict: "If ever you disturb our streets again, / Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace." (1.1.94-95). The chain of events leading to Juliet and Romeo's deaths is now irreversible – the deed is done, there is no going back, and Death has come to Verona. Mercutio and Tybalt have played their part, they have set the tragedy in motion. Their deaths are a necessary evil in order to fulfil the tragedy of Juliet and Romeo.

## Conclusion

In the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, two other main characters are often forgotten in favour of the eponymous protagonists. Tybalt is often misrepresented as the villain of the play, when he is just as much a victim as the rest of Verona's youth. As for Mercutio, he is most of the time only remembered for his puns and innuendos, even though there is much more to him than just a clown. They answer with anger and violence to the feeling of being misunderstood by everyone else and alone to defend themselves against a harsh city with a toxic organisation.

Shakespeare's text offers a lot of possible interpretations and analysis of these characters, if one reads between the lines, and it is in movie (and theatre) adaptations that the full potential of Mercutio and Tybalt can be realised – if the director and the actors know what they are doing.

Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 characterisations and Baz Luhrmann's 1996 portrayals lay out the modern understanding of these characters – Tybalt's abuse at the hands of his aunt and uncle and his hidden vulnerability, Mercutio's homosexuality and his close, perhaps intimate, relationship with Romeo, his darker side. All four actors brought their own vision of their characters to the table, and they did it so brilliantly that these characteristics stayed in the collective unconscious of the audience.

Often considered as the two best movie adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, Zeffirelli's and Luhrmann's are used to show how an epic, immortal piece can still have so much to give even after centuries of performances and analysis.

## References

- Shakespeare, W., *Romeo and Juliet*, The Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury (London), Third Edition (2012), edited by Weis, R.
- Zeffirelli, F., *Romeo and Juliet*, 1968, Paramount Pictures.
- Luhrmann, B., *Romeo + Juliet*, 1996, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.
- Lehmann, C., *Screen Adaptations: Romeo and Juliet – A close study of the relationship between text and film*, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010, Methuen drama, A & C Black Publishers Limited, London.
- Wells, S., *Shakespeare, Sex and Love*, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, Oxford University Press.
- The Shakespeare Geek, *the Original Shakespeare Blog*, <https://www.shakespearegeek.com/> [online].
- Torrance, E., *Character analysis: Benvolio, Mercutio and Tybalt in Romeo and Juliet*, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/character-analysis-benvolio-mercutio-and-tybalt-in-romeo-and-juliet> [online].
- Hammond, L., *Do Film adaptations of Romeo and Juliet enhance Shakespeare in contemporary society or undermine his cultural status?*, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013, <http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/study/english-literature-studies-brighton/brightonline/issue-number-four/do-film-adaptations-of-romeo-and-juliet-enhance-shakespeare-in-contemporary-society-or-undermine-his-cultural-status> [online].
- Mabillard, A., *Queen Mab. Shakespeare Online.*, September 18<sup>th</sup> 2009, <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/romeoandjuliet/romeoqueenmab.html> [online].
- Utterback, R.V., “The death of Mercutio”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 105-116, 1973, Folger Shakespeare Library, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2868849> [online].
- Ozark Holmer, J., “Draw, if you be men: Saviolo's Significance for Romeo and Juliet”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 163-189, 1994, Folger Shakespeare Library, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2871216> [online].