

## 2015 UNDERGRADUATE PAPER

**Queering Mercutio: Baz Luhrmann's  
Textually Inaccurate Take on  
Romeo's Best Friend**

Nicholas A. Brush  
Cameron University

---

Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, is a *tour de force* in the field of Shakespeare film adaptations. With an all-star cast and a cinematographic style aimed at attracting a younger audience to the world of Shakespearean drama, Luhrmann's film is considered one of the best, if not the best, of film adaptations of Shakespeare's classic tragedy. One of Luhrmann's most interesting choices in the presentation of characters for his film is portraying Mercutio as homosexual.<sup>1</sup> Harold Perrineau, Jr., plays the role of Romeo's best friend wonderfully, and he really sells the idea of a homosexual Mercutio. However, this was the first time Mercutio had been portrayed as a homosexual, at least for any on-screen performance. Not long after the film was released, American LGBT-interest magazine *The Advocate* asked Luhrmann about his choice for Mercutio's portrayal. Luhrmann responded, "It's in the text . . . there's no question he is [gay]."<sup>2</sup> This claim of an obviously homosexual Mercutio based on the source text is certainly an interesting argument, especially since there is little scholarship to be found on the subject. After reading and re-reading the text looking for specific incidences that reveal a homosexual Mercutio, reading scholarship about both queer theory and the application of queer theory to Shakespeare's works, and reviewing the history of homosexuality in both Renaissance and twenty-first century literature, I found no evidence supporting Luhrmann's claim.

To begin, Luhrmann's film adaptation is not the only high-grossing theatrical release of *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1968, director Franco Zeffirelli's version of *Romeo and Juliet* hit the silver screen. In this film adaptation, Mercutio is played by John McEnery. McEnery portrays the character as gregarious, convivial, and a little bawdy.<sup>3</sup> However, there is no implication, at least in McEnery's performance, that Mercutio is homosexual. If the source text makes it clear that Mercutio is, in fact, a homosexual, all productions will portray the character similarly. The fact that the two highest-grossing film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* approach the character differently suggests that perhaps there is more to Mercutio than Luhrmann believes.

Because of this discrepancy in the portrayal of Mercutio on-screen, the application of queer theory to Shakespeare's work must be addressed in order to further understand how to examine the character in both historical and modern contexts. In "Queer Shakes," Shakespearean queer theorist Madhavi Menon's introduction to the anthology *Shakespeareer*, she argues that while queer theory is easily applied to the works of Shakespeare, queer theorists must be careful in their applications. Finding homosexual characters and homosexual undertones is not useful when taking a queer approach to Shakespeare; finding out more about queer theory through the study of Shakespeare's works is the most important use of queer theory when applied to Shakespeare.<sup>4</sup> This argument points out an inherent flaw in modern queer theory, especially when queer theory is applied to texts that existed before the term *homosexual* was even a word. When one incorrectly applies queer theory to Shakespeare's work, he or she may be viewing characters or situations that might appear to be homosexual or homoerotic through a clouded lens. In order to better explain the misunderstanding and incorrect portrayal of Mercutio as a homosexual, the textual "evidence" must be discussed.

The first piece of evidence used by many to illustrate Mercutio's supposed queerness is his attitude towards women. In *Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, Stanley Wells argues that "Mercutio's cynical attitude to women and to love . . . has given rise to elaborative stage business and to speculation about his own sexuality."<sup>5</sup> However, the fact that someone is a misogynist does not mean he or she is automatically homosexual. Where did this idea of misogyny equating to homosexuality come from? Wells places the blame for a queer interpretation of Mercutio squarely on the shoulders of

the actors portraying him: “An actor, needing to imagine a fully rounded personality, is naturally liable to extrapolate information not directly provided by the text.”<sup>6</sup> The problem with inferring information not directly provided by the text, as Wells says, is that actors can and do come up with their own, often faulty, ideas of what a character should be. There is nothing in the actual text about a queer Mercutio, but by trying to create the on-stage persona for Mercutio, actors are inaccurately reading more into the character than is actually present in the text. This false reading of Mercutio’s character creates a precedence through which other actors may see a queer performance of Mercutio and follow suit without taking the time to actually examine the text for what is, or in this case is not, actually there. By reading more into the actions and attitude of Mercutio in his dealings with the women in *Romeo and Juliet*, actors create a queer Mercutio where one does not truly exist.

The second, and supposedly most damning, piece of evidence used when “proving” Mercutio’s queerness is one line from the play. In act 3, scene 1, Tybalt tells Mercutio, “Thou consortest with Romeo” (3.1.42).<sup>7</sup> However, *consort* did not always have the meaning it does now. A reading of *The Oxford English Dictionary* reveals that the verb form of *consort* did not mean “to have intercourse with” until 1600, or “to be a consort or spouse to, to espouse; to have sexual commerce with” until 1615. Tybalt’s use of the word more likely meant “to accompany, keep company with; to escort, attend” or “to combine in musical harmony; to play, sing or sound together,” the latter being the way Mercutio uses the word in his response to Tybalt. He says, “Consort? What? Dost thou make us minstrels? An thou / Make minstrels of us, look to hear nothing but discords. / [*indicating his sword*] Here’s my fiddlestick. Here’s that / Shall make you dance. Zounds, ‘consort’” (3.1.43-46). In his footnotes, editor Mario DiGangi discusses the possibility that Tybalt’s accusation is one implying a “socially disorderly, or, in Renaissance terms, a ‘sodomitical’ relationship.” However, this explanation is not the primary one DiGangi offers; he explains that Mercutio’s angry response is not due to a slight concerning his sexuality, but rather the “social slur” that denigrates the otherwise aristocratic Mercutio.<sup>8</sup>

DiGangi’s social slur argument is supported by another important word from the conversation between Mercutio and Tybalt: *thou*. “The basic factor determining choice of the *th-* or *y-* pronoun in Early Modern English is social relationship:

*th-* forms are used *down* the social hierarchy. . . . Social equals usually exchange mutual *y-* forms in the Early Modern Period.”<sup>9</sup> Tybalt’s use of the word *thou* in his accusation is meant to express his belief that Mercutio is not his social equal. While Mercutio does use *thou* in his response, twice actually, he ends it with the *y-* form pronoun *you*. Mercutio’s use of the *y-* form pronoun is his reminder to Tybalt that the two are of the same social status. By reexamining Tybalt’s accusation and Mercutio’s response with regard for the historical context of the language, readers see that Tybalt is accusing Mercutio of being beneath him socially, not that Mercutio and Romeo are involved in a homosexual relationship.

The fact that dialogue in *Romeo and Juliet* supposedly reveals Mercutio’s homosexuality without any other textual evidence to back it up suggests a need for the examination of sexual rhetoric in Renaissance England because the rhetoric of sexuality in Shakespeare’s time is drastically different from the rhetoric used when discussing sexuality in more modern times. In *Wanton Words: Rhetoric and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama*, Menon discusses and demonstrates the use of sexual rhetoric in the drama of Shakespeare’s time. While Shakespeare was certainly a master of wordplay and there are numerous examples of sexual innuendo in many of his works, Menon argues that many readers try to find sexual innuendo where it does not exist. In her discussion, Menon explains that the difficulty in dealing with rhetoric and drama from this period “is a difficulty that inheres in the idea of the performance itself and in the difficulty of pinning down the limits of performance” and that “performative mobility parallels Renaissance reiterability and rhetorical instability.”<sup>10</sup> This rhetorical instability is nowhere more apparent than in the previous discussion of word meaning and the historical context in which it is used. By focusing so much on the rhetorical analysis of modern vocabularies and vernaculars, readers from all educational backgrounds project their own understood meanings of words, phrases, and actions onto a text. The projection of their own rhetorical structures onto a text as old as that of *Romeo and Juliet* produces inaccurate readings and misunderstandings of characters, actions, plots, and other thematic devices. A queer reading of Mercutio can happen only through an inaccurate rhetorical analysis. Textually inaccurate readings of Mercutio create a homosexual character that is not truly homosexual. If readers closely examine the character using

the contextual sexual rhetoric of English Renaissance drama, they will see that Mercutio is, in fact, not a homosexual character.

To take this idea one step further, an examination of what exactly makes a character homosexual needs to take place. In *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film*, Menon argues that by applying a heteronormative stance to the works of Shakespeare, readers may miss out on the subtleties Shakespeare presented in his works. However, Menon also argues that the misapplication of queer theory can lead to misconstrued notions about what Shakespeare intended when he wrote his plays.<sup>11</sup> It is this misapplication that leads to a queer reading of Mercutio. Menon states that “the way in which we study history has significant bearing on what we study and how we study it.”<sup>12</sup> When queer theorists attempt a queer reading of any text, their interests in this field of literary theory can and do get in the way of what the source text actually says. When readers do not take the historical context of the language, rhetoric, and societal and socioeconomic norms into account, queer readings often turn into inaccurate readings of older texts. The idea of Mercutio as a homosexual is a projection of twentieth and twenty-first century ideas of what is queer and what is not. By applying modern interpretations of the homosexual to texts over four hundred years old, readers are misinterpreting what was originally intended in the source text. Mercutio was not written as a homosexual character; he was not in a sexual relationship with Romeo. Projecting these modern ideas of homosexuality onto characters, especially by taking the characters out of context, creates a falsehood of queerness and a takeover of the heteronormativity of a character.

Another queer theorist who tackles the issue of projection is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In “Queer and Now,” Sedgwick discusses the nature of heterosexuality when compared to non-heteronormative sexualities: “If we are receptive to Foucault’s understanding of modern sexuality as the most intensive site of the demand for, and detection or discursive production of, the Truth of the individual identity, it seems as though this silent, normative, uninterrogated ‘regular’ heterosexuality may not function as a sexuality at all.”<sup>13</sup> By striving to understand what is queer and what is not, Sedgwick argues, readers miss the underlying components that actually make one queer. This argument is easily applied to the discussion of a queer Mercutio. By spending so much time and effort determining what is queer and what is not, and then

applying these modern interpretations of queerness to decidedly non-modern literary characters, readers can and do miss out on the obvious heterosexual characteristics that appear in the texts they are reading.

As noted previously, the suggested proof of Mercutio's queerness comes only from his misogynistic lines and the one accusation that he *consortest* with Romeo. What about the rest of the text that suggests otherwise? If Mercutio and Romeo are truly in a homosexual relationship, that evidence would surface in other parts of the text and not just those few passages. Sedgwick's argument is similar to that of Wells; sometimes reading between the lines creates character traits, subtleties, and a litany of other things that are not actually in the text itself. Sedgwick takes the argument one step further and places the blame not on the individual actors, as Wells did, but on the division of heteronormativity and homosexuality in modern literary interpretations. Trying to remove heteronormativity from literature creates a false queerness that, in the case of Mercutio, leads to the portrayal of a character in ways Shakespeare probably never intended.

Carla Freccero's *Queer/Early/Modern* makes similar arguments and critiques of heteronormativity's influence on queer readings. Freccero opens chapter 3, entitled "Undoing the Histories of Homosexuality," with the following: "If one of the things an analysis of early modern lyric produces is a queered understanding of the subject, . . . then perhaps alternative histories might be generated to account for and critique heteronormativity's seemingly long-standing regime in the West."<sup>14</sup> In this chapter in particular, Freccero argues that many texts and characters are queered even though there is no historical basis for a queering of said text or character. In the same vein as Sedgwick, the desire to stand up to and fight against heteronormativity's domination of Western literature has created a vacuum that non-heteronormative characters must supposedly fill. This vacuum creates a problem: by removing the heteronormative qualities of characters, readers falsely queer characters who have no homosexual traits. Mercutio becomes a victim of this vacuum when he is read as a queer character. In removing the heteronormative aspects of the relationship between Mercutio and Romeo, a false queerness arises where one does not exist. It is the removal of the heteronormative that creates the homosexual in texts wherein the homosexual does not even exist, as is the case with Mercutio.

So, if Mercutio is not a homosexual and did not have a sexual relationship with Romeo, what kind of relationship did they have? They had a deep and loving friendship without any kind of sexual connection. In *Friendship and Queer Theory in the Renaissance: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern England*, John S. Garrison challenges the notions that all same-sex relationships should fall under the realm of queer theory. While there certainly are various same-sex relationships found throughout Renaissance literature, Garrison argues, queer theorists need to stop considering every same-sex relationship to be sexual in nature. In his discussion concerning *The Masque of Amity*, Garrison says that queering the “classical friendship tradition . . . conflicts with classical treatises on friendship that emphasize a lack of self-interest as a key characteristic of ideal friendship.”<sup>15</sup> Confusing Mercutio’s misogyny with homosexuality and taking Tybalt’s *consortest* line out of historical context alter the non-sexual relationship between Mercutio and Romeo. This misapplication of queer theory takes away from the type of relationship actually written into the play and is one of the primary examples of how applying queer theory to older texts can create a false sense of queerness where there is really none to be found.

On the subject of confusing same-sex friendships with homosexual relationships, Sedgwick’s book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, provides evidence to support the idea of a homosocial relationship between Romeo and Mercutio rather than a homosexual one. Since one person may consider a relationship to be erotic and another person may consider that same relationship to be platonic, labels like *homosexual* cannot be applied to male/male relationships without serious study into the nature of the relationship itself. When it comes to same-sex friendships, Sedgwick argues, the difference between homosocial and homosexual relationships between men are often confused, and a simple same-sex friendship is often misconstrued to be a homosexual relationship.<sup>16</sup> This is no more evident than in the misapplication of queer theory to determine Mercutio’s supposed queerness and the textually inaccurate description of Mercutio and Romeo’s relationship as homosexual rather than homosocial in nature. The confusion comes from modern interpretations of what is *homosexual* and what is not, just as modern interpretations of what is *consorting* and what is not, have led to misinterpretations

of Mercutio's sexuality. Because of the misuse of sexual rhetoric and the misunderstanding of the differences between homosocial and homosexual relationships, Mercutio's relationship with Romeo has been inaccurately made into a sexual relationship rather than a friendship shared between two men who care deeply for one another.

To further examine the idea of *homosocial* versus *homosexual*, David M. Halperin discusses five categories of same-sex relationships in his article "How to do the History of Male Homosexuality." Halperin says there are four "traditional, postclassical, or premodern categories," and those are effeminacy, pederasty/sodomy, friendship/love, and passivity/inversion. The fifth category, Halperin says, is what we know today as homosexuality.<sup>17</sup> Comparing the requirements for each category to Mercutio's and Romeo's relationship makes it apparent that their relationship does not fit anywhere other than the *friendship* category. There is no touching of genitalia between the two.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, there is nothing in the source text that indicates the relationship fits any of the other categories. The only way it would be possible to read the relationship between Mercutio and Romeo as anything outside of the *friendship* category would be to infer false information, as discussed by Wells, misapply queer theory, as discussed by Menon and Sedgwick, or to remove the heteronormative aspects of the relationship between Mercutio and Romeo, as discussed by Freccero. Mercutio may simply be a misogynist who loves his best friend very much; he is not, as Luhrmann would like his viewers to think, a homosexual.

In short, Baz Luhrmann's desire to portray Mercutio as a homosexual has no contextual or textual basis. The interpretation of Mercutio as queer is the result of many failings on the parts of readers, actors, and scholars who try to find things in texts that are not really there. However, this interpretation does not mean that the application of queer theory to Shakespeare's work should be abandoned. Even reexamining Mercutio through the lens of queer theory could create a new way to look at the relationship between two men who do love each other, but are not homosexuals. The desire to know more about the inner workings of Mercutio and how his relationship with Romeo affects the play needs to be addressed without blaming an oppressive heteronormative literary tradition. As queer theory moves forward, close attention needs to be paid to the results of studying Shakespeare's characters



in-depth. What might start as a study intended to praise Baz Luhrmann's radical decision to portray Mercutio as homosexual may evolve into a criticism of misreadings and misapplications of queer theory involved in that portrayal. Queer theory and its applications to Shakespearean texts should not become a joke because of inability to remove bias from the discussion. Keeping that biased "got to find the gay character" idea away from queer theory and its applications to Shakespeare helps prevent textually inaccurate readings, such as that of a queer Mercutio.

### Notes

1. Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, directed by Baz Luhrmann (1996; Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2010), Blu-ray.
2. "Homeo, Homeo," *The Advocate*, November 23, 1996, 84. <https://books.google.com/books?id=PWQEAAAAMBAJ&1pg=PT85&ots=sXehiHOcfr&dq=baz%20luhrmann%20mercutio%20gay&pg=PT85#v=onepage&q&f=false>.
3. Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey, *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli (1968; Los Angeles: Paramount, 2000), DVD.
4. Madhavi Menon, "Queer Shakes," in *Shakespeare*, ed. Madhavi Menon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3-4.
5. Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 157.
6. *Ibid.*, 158.
7. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Mario DiGangi (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2007), 3.1.42. In-text citations refer to this edition.
8. *Ibid.*, 180n4.
9. Jonathan Hope, *Shakespeare's Grammar* (London: Thomson, 2003), 73.
10. Madhavi Menon, *Wanton Words: Rhetoric and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), 12.
11. Madhavi Menon, *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 18-21.
12. *Ibid.*, 1.
13. Eve K. Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 9.
14. Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 31.
15. John S. Garrison, *Friendship and Queer Theory in the Renaissance: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3.
16. Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 2.
17. David M. Halperin, "How to do the History of Male Homosexuality," in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 280.
18. *Ibid.*, Table 1.