Emma Torrance analyses the characters of Benvolio, Mercutio and Tybalt within **Act 3, Scene 1** of Romeo and Juliet – a key scene in which a fight breaks out between the Capulets and Montagues.

**Key quotation**

**MERCUTIO Men’s eyes were made to look, and let them gaze;**

**I will not budge for no man’s pleasure, I. (3.1.54–55)**

**Setting the scene**

The fight which breaks out between the Capulets and Montagues in Act 3, Scene 1 is central to the plot of Romeo and Juliet: its consequences shift the story from romantic comedy to tragedy in a few short lines. The catalyst, Mercutio, is ironically a member of neither family. It is the day after the Capulet ball, and he, always ready to cause trouble, is hanging around the Verona streets with Benvolio and other Montague men. Tybalt is also out, determined to challenge Romeo to a duel. He thinks Romeo has insulted and mocked his family by disguising himself to gatecrash their ball. Tybalt wants to restore his offended honour publicly.

**How does Shakespeare present Benvolio here and in the rest of the play?**

Before Romeo’s arrival, Shakespeare presents us with a potentially explosive clash between two important characters: Mercutio and Tybalt. Between this hot-tempered pair stands level-headed Benvolio, Romeo’s cousin, a Montague and friend to Mercutio. In contrast to Mercutio, Benvolio wants to avoid confrontation. He is presented throughout the play as cautious and careful (his name, translated from Italian, means ‘good will’). Shakespeare portrays him as a go-between from the start. In the brawl opening Act 1, Scene 1, he plays the peacekeeper (‘Part fools, you know not what you do!’ (1.1.64–65)), and through these words Shakespeare establishes him as wise and cautious. These qualities are explored further in Act 3, Scene 1.

At the beginning of the scene Benvolio tries to manage Mercutio’s playful and dangerous temper. Shakespeare presents him as instinctively aware of the tension and his reasonable voice worryingly foreshadows what is to come. He knows from experience how easily trouble can break out and clearly fears the consequences:

**I pray thee, good Mercutio, let’s retire:**

**The day is hot, the Capels are abroad,**

**And if we meet we shall not scape a brawl, (3.1.1–3)**

In this example Shakespeare avoids forceful language. Instead, he represents Benvolio as persuasive, encouraging Mercutio to ‘retire’ from this very public place. He focusses on the influence of the weather and the Capulets’ presence rather than his powerful friend’s wild, reckless personality. His reasoning illustrates his ability to predict Mercutio’s likely response. Shakespeare shows him deliberately placing the potential blame elsewhere to avoid incensing the unpredictable Mercutio. ‘The day is hot’ conveys the mood as electric, dangerous and out of their control, whilst ‘the Capels are abroad’ seeks to suggest that the instigators of conflict will be Capulets. Finally, and most convincingly, Benvolio states with fatalistic certainty, ‘And if we meet we shall not scape a brawl’. Here, Shakespeare reinforces the conflict as unavoidable through Benvolio’s authoritative negative modal, ‘shall not’. However, in this well-judged warning Benvolio hints at what the audience suspects: Mercutio’s presence makes the probability of ‘scap[ing] a brawl’ unlikely. However, another important aspect of Benvolio’s character is also revealed through these lines: his loyalty. By using the collective pronouns ‘us’ (‘let’s) and ‘we’, Benvolio commits to standing by Mercutio’s side regardless of his own concerns.

In his exploration of their friendship, Shakespeare depicts them as intimate and friendly. Here, Benvolio draws on this intimacy to influence Mercutio. Despite Benvolio’s lower status, he addresses Mercutio using the informal, intimate pronoun ‘thee’. This symbolises the connection and affection between them. We might expect Benvolio to use ‘you’ – more appropriate and respectful to a social superior such as Mercutio. However, Shakespeare chooses this deliberately to demonstrate Benvolio’s diplomatic ‘good will’ and Mercutio’s relaxed attitude. At the same time, Benvolio reinforces his inferior status by pleading ‘pray’ rather than asking outright, and compliments Mercutio as ‘good’ in order to encourage sensible behaviour. Benvolio knows his influence is limited as Mercutio’s connection to the Prince gives him power and protection, allowing him to act recklessly without fear of the consequences. Shakespeare emphasises the danger of Mercutio’s unpredictable (or mercurial) personality and status through Benvolio’s deliberately tactful and diplomatic words.

**How does Shakespeare present Tybalt here and in the rest of the play?**

Interestingly, Shakespeare presents Tybalt as uncharacteristically wary in this scene. This is despite being established as hot-tempered and confrontational in Act 1, Scene 1’s brawl, and through his choleric rage when stopped from challenging Romeo at the ball. He now addresses Benvolio (who he earlier threatened to murder), Mercutio and the Montagues as ‘Gentlemen’ and wishes them ‘good den’ (3.1.38), both marks of polite, respectful behaviour. When speaking directly to Mercutio, Tybalt uses ‘you’ and ‘sir’ (3.1.41) to indicate Mercutio’s social superiority, taking care not to challenge or offend the Prince’s kinsman. Even when Mercutio taunts and provokes him to anger with deliberately insulting verbal attacks, Tybalt publicly backs down from the conflict to pursue Romeo (‘Well peace be with you, sir, here comes my man’ (3.1.56)).

Shakespeare presents the usually quick-tempered Tybalt as capable of both sensible and honourable behaviour: characteristics we rarely associate with him. He shows Tybalt avoiding confrontation, perhaps because of the Prince’s decree, and emphasises the importance of social hierarchy in Verona. Tybalt’s avoidance of Mercutio’s initial challenge and his determination to duel honourably with Romeo are actions which arguably follow the codes of both chivalry and honour, showing Tybalt to demonstrate better judgement than we expect.

Like the majority of Benvolio’s lines in this scene, many of Tybalt’s are written in iambic blank verse. Whilst Shakespeare often uses this technique to indicate a character’s higher social status, he is also hinting that both men approach this conflict cautiously. This rigid structure could symbolise that they plan their speech and behaviour rather than respond impulsively. However, Tybalt does slip out of meter and drops the polite pronoun in his accusation: ‘Mercutio, thou consortest with Romeo–’ (3.1.45). Through this momentary loss of control, Shakespeare reminds us of Tybalt’s natural temperament.

**How does Shakespeare present Mercutio here and in the rest of the play?**

Mercutio is unpredictable. He starts the scene in prose and slips in and out of meter at will. Through this verbal movement Shakespeare indicates his volatile and erratic temperament; he seems impossible to define or pin down. This is what makes Mercutio such an appealing character: we cannot predict what he will do next.

His name, derived from mercury, reflects this. It symbolises his role as both a messenger, like the god Mercury, and his unpredictable instability, like the chemical element (also known as ‘quicksilver’). These qualities clearly play out in this scene. Mercutio is the messenger for the ultimate tragedy: in his final lines he repeats ‘A plague a’ both your houses!’ (3.1.99–100) as both a fatal prediction and curse. Equally, his unpredictability, volatility and impulsiveness are shown as both reckless and entertaining. His ‘quicksilver’ wit and hot-temper are highlighted through clever puns and aggressive, audacious behaviour.

Here, as in Act 1, Scene 4, Mercutio takes centre stage. He demands to be looked at:

**Men’s eyes were made to look, and let them gaze;**

**I will not budge for no man’s pleasure, I. (3.1.54–55)**

This quotation sums Mercutio up: it conveys that he thrives on public admiration. The verb ‘gaze’ depicts the crowd as amazed, unable to look away, and implies that he imagines they see him as unique and spectacular. In many ways he is; Shakespeare wants the audience to admire and enjoy his reckless and irrepressible behaviour. Because of the clever, witty and complex speeches Shakespeare gives him, Mercutio is often the character actors want to play, despite having a relatively limited role.

In this example, Shakespeare also reveals Mercutio’s confidence, arrogance and power. He refuses to ‘budge’ and affirms forcefully his status by asserting that he ‘will not’ change or adapt to anyone, ‘for no man’s pleasure’. He behaves as if he doesn’t care what others think of him. Shakespeare repeats the pronoun ‘I’ at the beginning and end of the line to emphasise Mercutio’s show of arrogant confidence. It makes him seem egotistical and communicates his absolute refusal to back down or submit. Whilst this conforms to our expectations of Mercutio, who seems to fear nothing, we could interpret this self-importance as a necessary tactic to help protect his reputation and high status by avoiding a loss of public face.

As in earlier scenes, Shakespeare presents Mercutio as fiercely clever and humorous, despite the danger of the conflict. His brain is so swift, moving like mercury, that other characters and the audience often struggle to keep up with his endless puns and jests. Even in death he continues to play on words, ‘Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man’ [italics my emphasis] (3.1.96–97). This double meaning of ‘grave’ characterises his role as entertainer, a quality which ensures the audience, like his friends, grieve over his death. Whilst aspects of Mercutio’s behaviour may seem arrogant, it is important to remember that he ultimately acts in defence of his friend, demonstrating courage, loyalty and honour by standing in for Romeo when he refuses to fight Tybalt.

Interpretations

Some modern directors interpret the friendship between Romeo and Mercutio as in conflict with Romeo’s new love for Juliet. This interpretation infers that Mercutio’s mocking of Romeo’s ‘love’, his pursuit of him after the ball and his determination to stand and fight for him in this scene is evidence of his jealousy or possessiveness. Sometimes Mercutio is shown as a jealous friend who feels as if he has been overlooked, but in some more controversial interpretations Mercutio is implied to have sexual feelings for Romeo. When playing Mercutio in the Globe’s 2004 production, James Garnon initially dismissed this interpretation of Mercutio’s sexuality, describing it as ‘unhelpful’ to approaching the role. Later, however, he reflected: ‘Mercutio may well be in some sort of love with Romeo …what I’ve [found] really impressive is the scale and intensity of his love’. He concluded by suggesting, ‘At the moment, I think it might be quite useful to play Mercutio as someone who is not entirely certain about his sexual orientation. Uncertainty is more interesting, especially with Mercutio’