**Shakespeare's Characters: Mercutio (*Romeo and Juliet*)**

From *Romeo and Juliet*. Ed. K. Deighton. London: Macmillan.   
  
Mercutio is the very antithesis to Romeo. "The brooding nature of Romeo," says Dowden, "which cherishes emotion, and lives in it, is made salient by contrast with Mercutio, who is all wit, and intellect, and vivacity, an uncontrollable play of gleaming and glancing life. Upon the morning after the betrothal with Juliet, a meeting happens between Romeo and Mercutio. Previously, while a lover of Rosaline, Romeo had cultivated a lover-like melancholy. But now, partly because his blood runs gladly, partly because the union of soul with Juliet has made the whole world more real and substantial, and things have grown too solid and lasting to be disturbed by a laugh, Romeo can contend in jest with Mercutio himself, and stretch his wit of cheveril 'from an inch narrow to an ell broad.'   
  
Mercutio and the Nurse are Shakespeare's creations in this play. For the character of the former he had but a slight hint in the poem of Arthur Brooke. There we read of Mercutio as a courtier who was bold among the bashful maidens as a lion among lambs, and we are told that he had an 'ice-cold hand.' Putting together these two suggestions, discovering a significance in them, and animating them with the breath of his own life, Shakespeare created the brilliant figure which lights up the first half of *Romeo and Juliet*, and disappears when the colours become all too grave and sombre.   
  
Romeo has accepted the great bond of love. Mercutio, with his ice-cold hand, the lion among maidens, chooses above all things a defiant liberty of speech, gaily at war with the proprieties, an airy freedom of fancy, a careless and masterful courage in dealing with life, as though it were a matter of slight importance. He will not attach himself to either of the houses. He is invited by Capulet to the banquet; but he goes to the banquet in company with Romeo and the Montagues. He can do generous and disinterested things; but he will not submit to the trammels of being recognized as generous. He dies maintaining his freedom, and defying death with a jest.   
  
To be made worm's meat of so stupidly, by a villain that fights by the book of arithmetic, and through Romeo's awkwardness, is enough to make a man impatient. "A plague o' both your houses!" The death of Mercutio is like the removal of a shifting breadth of sunlight which sparkles on the sea; now the clouds close in upon one another and the stress of the gale begins." 

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From *The Works of William Shakespeare*. Vol. 8. Ed. Evangeline Maria O'Connor. J.D. Morris and Co.  
  
These few lines contain all that Arthur Brooke provides in the way of suggestion of the character of Mercutio — effectually nothing — the scene is the hall: —

"At the one side of her chair her lover Romeo,   
And on the other side there sat one called Mercutio;   
A courtier that each where was highly had in price,   
For he was courteous of his speech and pleasant of device;  
Even as a lion would among the lambs be bold,   
Such was among the bashful maids Mercutio to behold.   
With friendly gripe he seized fair Juliet's snowish hand —   
A gift he had that nature gave him in his swathing-band,   
That frozen mountain ice was never half so cold   
As were his hands, though near the fire he did them hold."

Thus far, however, the contrast with the grasp of Romeo is continued in the play, that Mercutio is the most decided foil to his more refined and delicately gifted spirit. In vivacity and liveliness he may be his equal, and he is endowed with an aptness for excitement and a flow of fantastic associations that, in the absence of sentiment, are the first though insufficient conditions of poetical invention; but his fancy tends to be overborne by fluency as his mirth by boisterousness; he is a gay companion and a ready partisan, but lax not to the verge but to the very limits of coarseness in his talk. It is this very characteristic that renders him indispensable, for such things are, and only by admitting a glimpse of them can art define their opposites, and if Mercutio, on the one side, and the old nurse, on the other, are to be tongue-tied where they would talk most willingly and freely, a glory will fade from the angel brightness of Juliet and the graceful sprightliness of Romeo, and the very ardour of their wishes run the risk of degradation by the withdrawal of a background necessary for guiding to the true scale of intervals and intensities from best to worst.

Even Tybalt himself is scarcely so gratuitous a brawler as Mercutio, but he lends a dignity to his victim by the contrast of entire destitution of finer accomplishments; he is a mere type of practised aptness for feuds and animosities. Mercutio draws from himself in his jesting imputation of quarrelsomeness to Benvolio, and there is a spirit of prophecy in his words that if there were two such there would be speedily none — fulfilled when his slayer Tybalt himself so soon is slain.   
Lloyd: *Critical Essays on the Plays of Shakespeare*.

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In the fourth scene we have Mercutio introduced to us. O! how shall I describe that exquisite ebullience and overflow of youthful life, wafted on over the laughing waves of pleasure and prosperity, as a wanton beauty that distorts the face on which she knows her lover is gazing enraptured, and wrinkles her forehead in the triumph of its smoothness! Wit ever wakeful, fancy busy and procreative as an insect, courage, an easy mind that, without cares of its own, is at once disposed to laugh away those of others, and yet to be interested in them — these and all congenial qualities, melting into the common *copula* of them all, the man of rank and the gentleman, with all its excellences and all its weaknesses, constitute the character of Mercutio!   
Coleridge: *Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare*.